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The Magician Who Rose From Failure: Tales of War and Magic

4





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Prologue: Memories of the Past

In a suburb of Lainur's capital, one young man was glaring at three others. Outnumbered, he knelt on the ground, while the three stood composed above him.

The man's name was Eido. His body was wrapped in a cloak, and he wore a black knitted hat on his head. His face was slender and his cheeks slightly hollow, and the eyes he glared with were long and narrow. The outfit he wore was designed to be inconspicuous; his presence was so insubstantial that he would simply disappear the moment he slipped into the shadow of a nearby building.

These three men had attacked the hideout of Eido's group, starting an all-out fight. The battle was unexpected, and Eido's men had been scattered, although his strenuous efforts had allowed them to retreat and recover. In the end, however, he was left outnumbered. Even if numbers weren't a problem, these three men were absurdly powerful, both as magicians and as soldiers. One-on-one, Eido might have been able to hold his own, but it was impossible when one man fought while the other two were ready to provide support at any time.

The battle, so fierce it tore up the ground and sent thunderous roars through the air, was reaching its climactic final act. Eido's breathing was ragged; his shoulders heaved as he looked up at the three victors. His face was creased with loathing and touches of bewilderment and desolation.

These men led the most influential vigilante crew in all the capital's dark corners. The man on the right had silver hair, tanned skin, and a burly build. Despite his lavish appearance, there was an air of gloom around him. His eyes seemed to blaze, and it was obvious he was sulking. His most striking feature was the constant, intense heat rolling off his body. It was as if embers of rage burned within him, setting his aether ablaze. His name was Craib Raytheft—or it was, before he changed his surname to Abend.

The man on the left was Renault Einfast. His hair was the color of bronze with

long bangs, and his build was slender. Even from where he stood a pace away, there was a powerful air of hot blood and unquenchable spirit around him; the atmosphere thickened around him, as if standing near him, you stood in the shadow of a great tree or an ancient, towering boulder.

Between them stood the third: a man with blond hair and blue eyes. His was a well-trimmed appearance which would put any nobleman to shame; he was by far the haughtiest of the three, and very much left the impression of a spoiled brat. That was why, despite the stronger presence of the other two, he didn't disappear between them. In fact, the very sight of him was just as overwhelming as the glaring midday sun. His aether dwarfed that of his companions by an order of magnitude, and it was enough to make him glow.

They were a motley crew. Perhaps it was the generosity of that man in the middle that let them get on so well despite their differences. Eido already knew all about that kindheartedness. Even while he stood against the three, Eido fully admired the golden-haired man, named Lai, for his magnanimity.

Only a few years ago the capital was in a terrible state. Villains used to crowd in the shadows, and to take a single step into that darkness put your every possession, your body, and your soul at risk. Each passing night came with another body found in the street. The military police had neither the reach nor the will to weed out the problem root and branch, and people were forced to live out their days in fear. The crown dawdled, and the nobles were too caught up in their own petty disputes to pay the issue any attention.

Two groups, one led by Eido and another by Lai, emerged to stand up against the villainy. They monitored the wicked deeds playing out in the corners of the capital the military police would not touch. They worked together to flush out the ruffians and restore peace to the city. On occasion they would brawl over a difference in ideology; even then, they considered each other respectable rivals and understood that they shared a common goal. Thanks to their activities, the capital grew steadily safer by the day. Eido was starting to have hope for the city's future—that it could return to the peaceful place it once was. The city could become a place everybody could be proud of, if only Lai's group would join hands with his.

That hope was betrayed. Betrayed by the authorities as they finally got off

their backsides to restore public safety. Once the state was involved, they had no choice but to get results. The state intended to solve the problem by creating an “obvious villain” and punishing him—and it was Eido’s group who would take the fall.

Eido’s group had no hand in the crime wave, of course—but nobody believed their claims. The whole maneuver had been conceived by nobles who resented his having outshone them and undermined their own less than scrupulous affairs. Eido’s crew’s hiding places dwindled by the day. His last resort was to turn to help from Lai’s group.

He believed they, at least, would lend him a hand. Instead, Eido was met with contempt, as if all their years of negotiation and cooperation counted for nothing. It was more than a rejection; Lai’s group capitalized on the moment of vulnerability to strike and corner Eido and his crew. It didn’t take long for Lai’s overwhelming power and merciless strategy to drive Eido and his men up against the wall.

“The magpie sings a simple tune. That song flows from the heavens and into the ears of all who stand in the way. A never-ending round. The rain-soaked eaves. Despair from the heavens. The falling rain tastes of iron.”

“Cascading Arrows.”

“Turn the wrath within me to flame. Scorch the skies with your cry and incinerate all in your path as you become a burning arrow.”

“Flamlarune.”

Eido and Craib each recited an incantation. Craib’s spell was similar to the old standby Flamrune in both incantation and effect, but the power behind it was on another level. His fiery lance crashed against the black arrows raining down from above. Eido barely had time to register the arrows burning to nothing as the intense heat from Craib’s spell forced him backwards.

Eido was out of options. His body and aether were exhausted. He could do nothing but raise his voice against those he’d trusted.

“Why?! Why turn on us?!”

“Because you’re in the way. Obviously.”

“In the way?”

“Yep.”

Eido gritted his teeth; his voice was strained as he spoke again. “I know we’ve fought against each other in the past. But I thought we understood each other. I thought our goals were aligned!”

His outburst received no answer.

“Why are you casting us aside now?!”

We needed you!

“The friendship we shared! Does that mean nothing anymore?!”

We believed in you!

“We celebrated our victories together! Or was that all a lie too?!”

We were together!

“Did you ever believe in the dreams we shared with each other?!”

He needed to know whether they were lying to him or this was all just some huge, cruel joke.

“Answer me!” he demanded.

Eido did not receive the response he was hoping for.

Lai averted his gaze. “Everything was a lie.”

Eido’s body froze. This was a man he had always believed he could trust with his life.

Renault stepped forward then.

“Wait, Renault,” Lai warned.

“Let me deal with him, please.”

“No. This is something I have to do.”

“But—”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll step back, Renault...” This time, it was Craib who spoke. He sounded bored.

Renault scowled, but said “very well,” and withdrew as he was told.

“You stay back too, Craib.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Lai came to stand in front of Eido. “Get out of my sight, Eido. Leave the capital.”

“Why should I?”

“You will. Whether you want to or not. *Tear. Shatter. The firmament forewarns of a crashing torrent. Give form to the principles of Heaven and Earth, then take those exquisite principles and come down with a crash!*”

Artglyphs gathered in Lai’s hand, radiating a golden-yellow light which spilled out as far as the eye could see. The light split the heavy clouds in the sky clean in two, forcing them to give way to a giant magic circle.

“I’m warning you, Eido. Leave.”

Eido said nothing.

“Eido!” Lai roared, leveling his spell at the man in front of him.

A deafening roar cracked through the air, the vibrations striking everything around them. A blinding flash seared Eido’s vision, and the next second everything was thrown into the air. The magic had called forth a bolt of lightning that crowded out the air above and shattered the ground with an oppressive blast of heat, leaving nothing but persistent plumes of smoke.

When they did, Eido was nowhere to be seen.

“Y’don’t think you went a bit overboard there?” Craib asked, panic sharpening his voice.

“A strike like that might have been a little too much, even for Eido,” Renault agreed.

“Eido’s strong. Too strong to treat him with kid gloves. I’m sure he’s fine.”

The spell hadn’t killed Eido. His comrades hidden in the shadows had helped him escape. Lai was sure he would have had a split second to escape, not least because he’d purposely delayed his attack.

Eido had lost. They would see neither hide nor hair of him again, and he would eventually leave the capital altogether. All without knowing the truth lurking behind their battle here tonight.

“Y’sure this was for the best?” Craib asked.

“Yeah. We’re nobles whether we’re fit for it or not, and there’s still so much we can’t do anythin’ about. This was the only way to spare their lives.”

“We couldn’t have helped ‘em hide or somethin’?”

“Where, exactly? Every seedy little borough of the capital is gonna be plowed down and rebuilt. The underground’s been handed off to the Langula House. There’s no space for them in the capital now.”

“Perhaps we ought to have told them the truth,” Renault suggested.

“If we did, they would’ve insisted on staying and fighting, and I don’t think we’d have been able to talk them out of it. Even if our side won, we’d end up taking the heat for it. For the nobles, a low status marks you as an ideal scapegoat.”

“Will Eido really be able to make his escape?”

“He’ll be fine. He’s got rabbit holes and hidden passages all over the capital. No way the nobles’ll notice them with how half-assed their perimeter is.” Lai looked at the spot where Eido had stood mere minutes earlier. “I’m sorry, Eido. I wasn’t strong enough. But I will be. I’m gonna get all the power I need to make this city the bright, peaceful place we always wanted. I know I’m not giving you a choice here, but I’m gonna make this promise to you anyway.”

Lai deeply regretted betraying Eido as he did. “You’re one of us, Eido. Don’t die on us. As long as you stay alive, we can join forces again in the future, just like we used to.”

Lai could only pray that Eido would keep himself safe, as one might pray for the eternal happiness of a departing friend.

So ended the day Lai—later King Shinlu Crosellode—and Eido parted ways.

Eido woke from a nostalgic dream of his flight from the capital with his

surviving companions, still reeling from Lai's rejection and their total defeat. Eido was badly hurt, but he had managed to escape with his life—at the cost of his beloved city. It was already teeming with nobles setting about their work; had he stayed, it would only be a matter of time before they found him. Eido's group didn't have the strength, numbers, or even a plan for fighting back.

And so, Eido made use of a passage he'd built in secret to leave the capital through the undercity, headed west. There, he would begin his long, long stint as a recluse. It was only later that he learned who Lai *really* was, and that his companions were state magicians who would earn the names Crucible and Stronghold.

One of Eido's men appeared silently within the tent.

"Boss."

"What is it? Are we out of food?"

"No. There are Imperial soldiers outside. All armed."

"So they really did plan to get rid of me once I served my purpose, I see."

"What should we do?"

"Just what we planned, of course. Use all the traps if you need to; just make sure everyone gets out."

"What about you?"

"I'll worry about myself, so you all worry about yourselves, okay?"

The man smiled at Eido with a hint of irony in the curve of his lips. "This is just like when we escaped from the capital, isn't it?"

"Yes, but now we've had practice. This time we're fully prepared if someone decides to betray us." Eido got to his feet and threw his cloak around his shoulders.

"You're going?"

"Of course. This is the only chance left to lure out Shinlu Crosellode."

This had been Eido's plan all along: to get the Empire and Porque Nadar on his side and use their capture of Prince Ceylan as bait for Shinlu. He was never

going to hand Ceylan over to either of his “employers.” This was all so that he could pay Shinlu back for betraying him twenty years ago. Certain unexpected developments had thrown off the early stages of the plan, but he hadn’t lost his chance completely.

“We’ve heard the prince is with the magician called Waterwheel at the moment.”

“We know him very well, don’t we?” Eido said.

“He always got in our way back in the capital.”

“He could’ve gone further if he wanted to. I remember that used to get on my nerves.” Eido smiled as he reminisced before addressing his years-long subordinate again. “Survive. We still have our goal to achieve. Don’t let anybody die needlessly till we do.”

Hours passed. The Empire’s soldiers stationed in Nadar received the news that the ambush on Eido’s group had started. When communication suddenly stopped entirely, they sent out a party to investigate. The first party consisted of the strongest soldiers, almost guaranteed to be able to wipe out Eido and his men. They would have finished by now; the only explanation was that they were wasting their time doing something else.

What the investigative party found was a mountain of bodies. The casualties came from both the Empire and Nadar, but not a single one belonged to Eido’s men. Some had fallen into traps. Others fell victim to magic. Most of them bore wounds in their backs and sides. It could mean only one thing: these soldiers, planning to launch a surprise attack, were themselves ambushed.

Needless to say, the tent in which Eido and his men had slept was empty.

The officer in charge of the investigation called to one of his men. “How are things looking over there?”

“I’m sorry, sir. There are no survivors.”

“To think the Black Panther Cavalry was wiped out by so few men...”

“I can barely believe it. These were men who allied themselves with thieves,

and yet the Empire's best wasn't enough to defeat them."

"That only goes to show how powerful that man really is. It would take an incredible soldier or magician to take him and his troop out. One whose name is known across the land."

"Just who is this man, sir?"

"Eido, the Lacuna. I've heard he's a fearsome magician who used to throw his weight around in the kingdom's underbelly. When it all came to a head, he fled the capital after a chaotic battle," the officer murmured. Suddenly, he spotted a black shadow at the tip of a broken spear: a torn fragment of Eido's cloak. "But it seems even he did not escape unharmed."

There was a dark red stain on that scrap of cloth. From the size of the stain, the wound would have needed a very powerful healing spell to fix it up—and spells like that cost a *lot* of aether. Eido had two choices. Either he would sacrifice the aether required to heal the damage, or he would suffer the anxieties of letting it heal naturally.

"I find it hard to believe that even the general made the mistake of underestimating Eido's true power."

"Your orders, sir?"

"Send a message to General Leon. What we do next is up to him."

The soldier mounted his horse and hurried to inform the general.

Part 1: A Royal Audience and the Gathering of the War Council

A few days had passed since Arcus discovered and suppressed Porque Nadar's agents and joined with Louise Rustinell to save Prince Ceylan. Having allowed Eido his escape, Arcus returned to Rustinell's capital temporarily to ponder his next moves. While they were there, Noah, Cazzy, and Arcus received a message.

After he and Louise had parted ways, she and her soldiers broke through roadblocks in Nadar to follow the prince's footsteps. As for the prince, he had taken a different route to enter the county and was staying in the first town he'd come across, where he met up with Louise and her soldiers. She filled him in on the recent string of incidents, after which he returned safely to Rustinell.

There was no pursuit from Nadar, nor any attack by the count's bandit proxies in other territories. While Louise had originally steeled herself for a fight as they retreated, everything ended without incident. Porque Nadar's attack on Ceylan did not come to fruition, and for the moment Arcus allowed himself a sigh of relief.

But it wasn't over yet. After returning to Rustinell, Ceylan had moved to the fortress city of Nalvarond and called the nearby lords to help subjugate Porque with extreme prejudice. A proclamation was issued to the western nobles outlining the order's rationales. The prince gathered military power from the nobles, monarchs, and minor lords occupying western Lainur in order to put together an army. The prince's actions were so rapid and decisive that they even had his allies' heads spinning, let alone Nadar's.

Meanwhile, Porque was gathering his own army, and had made a declaration of war against the royal family. In his position, that meant revolt. His army was made up of his subordinates, active and conscripted soldiers, and various hired mercenary groups. They numbered four thousand, and were already marching toward Rustinell.

Arcus had expected the Gillis Empire, which lay behind Nadar, to launch an

invasion too, but they seemed to be biding their time. Perhaps any military movements on their part were too small to be observed as of yet—but it was difficult to know.

This whole thing sure has blown up.

That was the summation of Arcus's current thoughts on the matter. Although he was aware he was probably thinking too hard about it, he couldn't help feeling like his tiny actions had sparked an all-out war. He knew this would've likely happened eventually anyway, but he still felt slightly queasy about it all.

"I would never imagine one seemingly insignificant action could lead to an entire civil war. You are like the puppeteer manipulating the strings behind the kingdom, Master Arcus."

"Shut it."

"If ya really wanna make it big in the underworld, ya can't be runnin' 'round with a cute li'l face like that. I know where ya can buy a mask if ya want."

"Shut it."

Despite how he felt, his attendants had no qualms teasing him about the entire ordeal.

A few days had passed since Prince Ceylan's proclamation against Porque Nadar. Louise had called Arcus and his servants to Nalvarond; they made the journey alongside Deet. As promised in the warehouse district, Louise had informed the prince of Arcus's involvement in everything.

Ceylan wished to thank Arcus personally, so the young magician now waited quietly in a temporary audience room. With him were nobles who had come to greet the prince.

At the end of the room sat a majestic throne atop a podium of stairs. A canopy adorned the throne, different from the interior design of the rest of the room. It must have been prepared specially for Ceylan. It seemed to hold a symbolic message: that royalty should rarely be seen. Three bamboo screens, one at the front and two at the sides, hung from the top of the canopy; it reminded Arcus of the ancient Chinese thrones he'd seen from movies in the

man's world.

Ceylan Crosellode, Lainur's next king, was behind those screens now. He wore a long white robe embroidered with dragons in golden thread; there was a slit from the hip down for ease of movement, and its sleeves were wide.

Arcus was curious to see the prince's face, but he wore a black veil, making it hard even to tell whether his features were masculine or feminine. It was a custom for Lainur's princes to wear such a veil in public until they were of age, so only the royal family and those closest to them knew what he looked like.

Ceylan was supposed to be around the same age as Arcus, but he already looked completely comfortable in his post. Most children put in an authoritative position were timid, but Ceylan showed none of that. He was silent and, above all else, looked totally relaxed, as though his sitting there was the most normal thing in the world. He exuded a powerful, almost indescribable air of rulership.

In this world, there were none more powerful in the major nations than their royal families. In the man's world, monarchies were usually an extension of the government. Here, their rule was as absolute as that of gods. It was said that those with royal blood held power far beyond human understanding. It was that power and knowledge that made them revered.

Ceylan sat atop the podium while his attendants waited at the bottom of the steps. As a regional monarch, Louise Rustinell held a special status compared to the other nobles. She and her son Deet waited with the prince's guard by those steps.

The nobles of the west and those serving under Louise took a knee before the podium, introducing themselves and greeting the prince one by one.

"I am a retainer of Rustinell House, Galanger Uiha. I have come here with Lady Rustinell, and it is my heartfelt desire to be of assistance to Your Royal Highness."

"I am Rover Ronell of the Ronell Barony. I have come as requested, Your Royal Highness."

"Pistoris Sharman of Sharman County. It is an absolute pleasure. I shall pour everything I have into fighting for Your Royal Highness."

And so it went.

It seemed not all of Lainur's western nobles were in attendance. Forty-four had answered the prince's call, all of varying ranks, and Louise Rustinell was the only monarch. Every lord had their troops in tow.

Ceylan's responses to the lords were short. "Fight well." "I have high hopes." His tone was cold, as though he were indifferent to each lord's individual presence.

Lainur was one of the major powers in this world, and therefore the prince's authority was great. He must have been taking such a steadfast attitude to ensure nobody looked down on him.

Once the nobles had finished their greetings, it was finally Arcus's turn.

"Arcus Raytheft! You may step forward to address His Royal Highness."

Arcus felt his body stiffen.

Noah leaned over to whisper in his ear. "Steel your nerves, Master Arcus."

"Don't you mean 'relax'?"

"Actually, being slightly nervous is a good thing in this case. Being overly relaxed might give the impression that you hold His Royal Highness in contempt. Play into those nerves, and act afraid."

"I get you."

"Allow me to run through this once more. You may only raise your head the second time you are granted permission. When you have given your greeting, lower your head, keep your response to His Royal Highness's words short, and do not, under any circumstances, respond negatively."

"Got it. Thanks."

Arcus stepped forward and kept his head low to avoid looking directly at the prince, as formality dictated. Even though the prince's presence and Arcus's opportunity to speak with him directly was a privilege, he couldn't help thinking that all these ancient formalities were more annoying than anything else. As Arcus approached the prince, he heard voices whispering.

“What is a child doing here?”

“I have heard the rumors. I believe his name is...”

“What is the meaning of this?”

Suspicious gazes accompanied those scattered questions. Arcus had more important things to focus on than how awkward they made him feel, however. He took another step forward.

What's this?

All of a sudden, an overwhelming tension ran through him, and his body froze up completely. He realized immediately that it was the air of authority that Ceylan exuded; it was on a totally different level from the pressure he felt in the presence of state magicians. Arcus's hands were sweating, and it felt like his blood was freezing in his veins. Numbing electricity seemed to run along his skin. The same terrifying sensation swept through his body each time he tried to move. It was like somebody was holding the point of a sword to the back of his neck, and he was almost gasping for breath.

“Arcus Raytheft. Raise your head.”

Arcus waited for Ceylan's attendant to repeat the order before obeying. His eyes fixed on the prince. Even at this distance, Arcus could discern nothing beneath his veil. For a moment, there was silence—and then the prince spoke.

“Arcus Raytheft, I presume?”

“I-It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Royal Highness. I am Arcus Raytheft, eldest son of House Raytheft. I am humbled to have been called here by Your Royal Highness on this day.”



Arcus bowed his head and waited. Ceylan did not respond to his greeting immediately. Arcus started to worry he'd messed up somehow. Though the veil obscured his view, he had the sense the prince was scrutinizing him. The longer the silence continued, the more anxious Arcus became, until at last Ceylan exhaled.

"Arcus Raytheft. Your deeds concerning this recent matter were remarkable. Were it not for the fact that you detected Porque Nadar's wicked scheme so quickly, perhaps I would not be sitting here now. You have my heartfelt gratitude."

The whisperings in the room grew more fervent. While it wasn't unheard of for people to be praised by their rulers, being thanked directly was exceedingly rare. It was that and the idea of Arcus aiding the prince in the first place that had the attendants talking. Only after the noise had settled down did Arcus speak again.

"As a servant of the crown, I believe it is only right to aid Your Royal Highness in whatever way I can. As such, while undeserving, I am utterly humbled by Your Royal Highness's praise."

"A servant of the crown... Yes. The awareness you show of your position at such a young age is nothing short of admirable. As your superior, that gives me great joy."

"Sir." Arcus bowed his head again.

He never thought the prince would speak so highly of him. He was only expecting a brief acknowledgment, and yet here the prince was thanking and praising him—not to mention Ceylan seemed to be taking on a gentler tone with him compared to the other nobles. It was enough to make him feel self-conscious.

"Now, Arcus Raytheft. I shall allow you to accompany me in the upcoming battle. You will fight by my side."

"Huh?"

Ceylan's words didn't register at first. Only when their echoes had permeated his mind did Arcus understand.

I shall allow you to accompany me in the upcoming battle.

The prince was telling him to fight in the battle to subjugate Nadar, but as far as Arcus knew, he had been called to receive a brief commendation. He had been planning to finish up his silver talks with Louise and take his newfound supplies back to the capital. Ceylan apparently had other ideas about his intentions. Arcus glanced at Louise. The monarch of Rustinell looked just as surprised as he was (while her son pumped an excited fist in the air). Arcus was clearly taking too long to respond, as there was a hint of ice in Ceylan's voice when he next spoke.

"Well? Has something displeased you?"

"No, Your Royal Highness! Far from it!"

"Good. I trust you will fight well in the upcoming battle."

"Yes, Your Royal Highness!" Arcus found himself agreeing.

Ugh...

There was no backing out now. Refusing Ceylan's order would give the message that he either didn't want to fight alongside the prince, or that he was against the plan to bring Nadar under control in the first place. All he really wanted was to avoid getting involved, and yet he effectively had no choice.

What have I done?

It was the way of this world. So long as Arcus sought status here, this was something that was bound to happen eventually. That was why he had planned to polish his magic to perfection and improve himself as far as his abilities would allow, but he never expected the time to come so soon.

Those were the thoughts plaguing Arcus's mind as he waited to be dismissed—but it was not Ceylan's attendant who spoke next.

"Your Royal Highness! Might I be granted permission to speak?" One of the lords stepped forward and lowered his head before the prince.

He looked to be in his thirties. His face was unshaven and deeply browned from the sun; his physique suggested his house was a martial one.

"Count Bowe!" Ceylan's attendant snapped. "His Royal Highness is still

conversing with Arcus Raytheft! Step down!”

“I am aware, and yet I beg your permission to speak. Please.” The count stood his ground.

The attendant’s eyes narrowed, but Ceylan interrupted him before he could say anything else.

“You are Count Daws Bowe, yes?”

“Sir!”

“I am speaking with Arcus now. What is so important that you see fit to barge in on our conversation?”

“Sir. I humbly beg your forgiveness for so rudely interrupting. However, as a loyal vassal to the crown, I believe I have a duty to say something. Please...I beg your permission to speak.”

The prince’s guards began to stir, preparing to have Count Bowe step down by force. Ceylan raised a hand to stop them.

“Very well. Speak.”

“With all due respect, sir, this young noble is still a child. While I cannot attest to his abilities during peacetime, I cannot believe he is fit to stand by Your Royal Highness’s side in the midst of battle. It would deal a great blow to the entire kingdom if anything were to happen to you, sir, because of that. This is something I cannot overlook. If I may ask Your Royal Highness to reconsider...”

The count wasn’t speaking out of concern for Arcus’s safety, but for the prince choosing to surround himself with inadequate protectors. He can’t have been the only one to think so; whispers were rippling through the other lords at his words.

“Asking a child to protect oneself on the battlefield is... Well...”

“Arcus Raytheft was that disinherited boy, wasn’t he?”

“Yes! Quite unfit to stand by His Royal Highness’s side.”

Everybody seemed to doubt Arcus’s abilities, and it was because they’d all heard the rumors already. One glare from Ceylan’s attendant was enough to

bring those whisperings to an immediate halt.

“Count Bowe. It is not unprecedented for one so young to be blessed with great ability—myself and the son of House Rustinell, for example. Furthermore, I have heard that Arcus Raytheft gave his assistance in the suppression of Nadar’s agents, as well as chasing off those who would cause me harm. Only somebody with great power would be capable of such feats.”

“Sir! I agree that there are young citizens of Lainur who have been graced with exceptional talent. However, there are very few of them, even among the upper noble classes. This boy is the son of a low-ranking family. While I cannot say this with absolute certainty, I believe the chances that he is one of those talented few to be extremely low.” Count Bowe turned to Arcus and curled the corner of his lip into a sneer. It seemed to say that the idea of Arcus fighting alongside the prince was laughable, that he didn’t belong here.

Creep.

The audacity of Bowe’s words made Arcus’s skin prickle with anger. Even if he didn’t want to go to war, he didn’t want to be made out as a weakling either. Yet Arcus was not permitted to say a single word in his defense. He was dealing with a count, and didn’t have the status to openly disagree with him. All Arcus could do was grind his teeth as the count kept talking.

“How can we even be sure that the stories we’ve heard of this boy’s involvement in the storming of the warehouse are true? I cannot help but be doubtful.”

“Huh?” This time it was Louise who spoke. “Are you suggesting my men were just seeing things?”

“Y-Yes. To put it bluntly, that is exactly what I am suggesting.”

“Hmph. Bold words for a lowly count.”

The count’s expression hardened—but his frown lasted only a moment before he spread his arms out dramatically and began to speak, his words deliberate. “Lady Louise. I know Your Ladyship is a monarch with a large territory, but I am a noble of the *kingdom*. Referring to me as a ‘lowly count’ is a little ironic, is it not? The title of ‘count’ is a prestigious one, granted to those families who have

served the crown and the kingdom tirelessly. If Your Ladyship would be so kind as to take back her earlier remark—”

“What?!” Louise spat.

Count Bowe let out a squawk like a strangled goose and began to heave with frightened sobs. He may have been a man blessed with a powerful martial family, but right now he looked like nothing more than a frightened rodent.

Taking the count’s squeal as a sign, Louise’s retainers faced him and stood tall, letting the powerful military air around them become oppressive. The count’s face drained of color as they stood before him, their hostility on full display.

Louise raised her voice, adding more salt to the wound. “Do not make light of me, *noble*. Got it?!”

Ferocious anger rolled off her in waves, filling the hall. Seized with fear, the count gulped visibly. Just having a count’s title didn’t guarantee strength of character, it seemed. Charlotte’s father, Purce Cremelia, was also a count, but comparing him to Bowe was like comparing chalk and cheese.

Louise’s display of anger had destabilized the atmosphere in the room. Only a few of the nobles still looked calm; the others were trembling just as Count Bowe was.

“Louise,” Ceylan said. “Restrain yourself.”

“Sir. I beg Your Royal Highness’s forgiveness.” Louise took a step back.

Count Bowe, on the other hand, apparently still felt the need to speak. “Sir, I have heard that this boy was disinherited. A foolish boy who cannot retain his birthright has no place by Your Royal Highness’s side. I cannot believe I am the only one to hold such an opinion.”

“Hmm.”

“If Your Royal Highness still wishes for somebody’s accompaniment, might I suggest somebody else? Myself, in fact, if I may be so bold. I have a long and distinguished history of military service; I believe I am an adequate fit for the role.”

That seemed to be his intention right from the start, and it was utterly shameless. The other nobles agreed, as they raised their voices in protest.

“I understand your point of view, Count Bowe.”

“Sir! Does that mean...” The hope was obvious in Bowe’s voice.

“Yes.”

Bowe’s face visibly lit up at the thought of serving by the prince’s side, while Louise’s expression darkened equally. The other nobles also grumbled their dissatisfaction at being outsped.

The count’s jubilation was not to last.

“I understand perfectly,” Ceylan continued. “You doubt my judgment.”

“I—What?”

“Am I wrong? I have selected Arcus to serve by my side, as I have judged him worthy to do so. By objecting to my decision, you are implying that I have chosen poorly,” Ceylan explained lightly.

Personally, Arcus thought the prince’s impression of Bowe’s objection was a result of reading too much into it.

“I am aware that this is my first time going into battle,” Ceylan said.

“However, I never thought that my closest allies in this fight—that is, the high nobles—would dare be so direct with me. You do not see the problem in voicing your criticisms of my judgment, and by extension, my plans to subjugate Nadar, in front of everybody here? Heh. It is difficult to imagine a more open rejection of one’s prince.”

Ceylan’s words fell halfway between a murmur to himself and a declaration he wished for everybody to hear. Hearing the tone of accusation creeping into his voice, the royal guard immediately prepared to move. It was only natural. No imperial guard would let an affront against their prince slip. It was the very same way Louise’s retainers had reacted, but with an extra layer of threat, which caused Bowe to panic.

“No, sir! That was not the intention behind my words at all!”

“Really? Because that is precisely how they sounded to me.”

"I *am* sure, sir! That was not what I intended at all! I merely doubted the suitability of this boy to serve Your Royal Highness!" Count Bowe bowed his head desperately.

Arcus doubted the count had put enough initial thought into his greedy proposition to realize how his words might be interpreted, but he was certainly realizing it now. It just went to show that raising too careless an objection to a royal's word was equal to criticizing them, as Arcus suspected. What this conversation proved more than anything else was the count's inability to understand what Ceylan was thinking. Clearly the decision to have Arcus by his side was one borne of the prince's personal judgment. Yet if Ceylan went on to accept the count's suggestion and change his mind, he would likely be seen as indecisive and lose face in the eyes of the attending lords. Simply accepting a suggestion made to him would set a bad example as these people's leader.

Ceylan began to chuckle. It was a sinister sound. The lords in the room began to shift uncomfortably.

"I *do* understand where you are coming from, Count. This will be my first campaign on the battlefield. A weathered veteran such as yourself would no doubt be able to see the aspects in which I am inexperienced."

"N-No, sir, I wasn't..." The count struggled to defend himself, but it was already clear that Ceylan had firmly decided that Bowe was criticizing him; he wasn't going to listen to any excuses at this point.

Ceylan kept on chuckling. With even the other lords in the room feeling threatened, there was only one thing left for Bowe to do.

"Please, Your Royal Highness! Please allow me to retract my thoughtless remark!"

"Heh. Very well. Stand down, Count."

"Sir..." Bowe stayed motionless and gaped at the prince.

"Count Bowe!" Ceylan's attendant snapped. "How long do you plan on staying there?! His Royal Highness has asked you to step down!"

"So sorry, sir!" Bowe hurriedly fled backward.

Ceylan seemed unable to shake free of his fit of laughter. The very sight of it sent chills down Arcus's spine. It increased in volume, forcing the rest of the hall's sounds into deathly silence. As the lords developed a collective sheen of cold sweat, Ceylan finally stopped laughing and sprang to his feet.

"Listen well!" he cried from atop the podium. "I shall not change my mind! I have the same gifts as my father, Shinlu Crosellode! The gift of perfect foresight, and the gift of leadership over all of you, and I shall prove that to you in this upcoming battle! You shall learn that I do not make mistakes!"

The gathered lords fell to their knees at once to show their support for the prince's words. Ceylan turned to face Arcus and pointed his sheathed sword at him.

"Arcus!"

"Sir!"

"You shall play an active role in this war. Make sure you do not give anybody reason to question my judgment."

"Yes, Your Royal Highness!" Arcus gave a hearty response; he had no other choice, after all.

If he refused, he'd probably have more to worry about than being beheaded. He was duty-bound to comply, and those were weighty shackles indeed. Getting involved in a war was bad enough, but thanks to Count Cretin, he now had to worry about protecting the prince's honor on top of that.

The attendant finally gave the order to stand down. There was only one question that he had the wherewithal to ask himself:

Why?

He returned to Noah's side, where the servant greeted him with a smile.

"Congratulations."

Arcus barely suppressed the urge to wrap his fingers around Noah's neck.

When the audience with Ceylan was over, a rough count of the soldiers in Nalvarond was held. The lords, regional monarchs, and their vassals had five

thousand together, while Ceylan had brought with him fifty imperial knights. While conscripting citizens from the local area would have bolstered their numbers, that was deemed unnecessary for now, as reinforcements were expected from central Lainur. There were enough soldiers for now, and the prince had the powerful and renowned Rustinell and its vassals on side. Nadar's army, on the other hand...

"Mom, Nadar said they had fifteen thousand."

"Three times as many as us. Like we're gonna believe that."

"Yeah. There's no way his numbers are that big."

"I agree. If none of the surrounding nobles are supporting him, his only option would be hiring mercenaries, and hiring *that* many of them just isn't possible."

Arcus knew of cases in the man's world where demonstrators would exaggerate their numbers by more than ten times the real figures, and that seemed to be similar to what was happening here. The difference was that in the man's world, information filtered through to the public through television and radio. If a media outlet said, for example, that there was a certain number of protestors at a demonstration, the majority of the public would believe it without question, as they had no other choice.

If the soldiers believed they really were dealing with fifteen thousand enemy troops, they would become anxious. If this side didn't know the enemy's true numbers, their plan of attack was liable to have holes. In this world, it was difficult to gauge such things for sure. Even a simple exchange of bluffs like this was important to one's strategy.

"I can't wait to fight."

"Yes, it's been a while."



The same savage, bloodthirsty grin appeared on the faces of mother and son. Arcus doubted they were really concerned with the number of opponents they were up against.

Imagine smiling while talking about stuff like this. That's kinda terrifying...

The way they spoke so casually with their vassals with clear, confident voices made Arcus think they'd still be smiling even if they believed Nadar was telling the truth about his numbers.

One thing that struck Arcus as odd was that a single state magician had joined their numbers. His black hair was short and even, and that was just the start of the black outfit that covered him from head to toe. His clothes were completely unembellished—far too plain for a man who was supposed to belong to nobility. It was difficult, too, to discern his age at first glance.

He was Roheim Langula, who took the nickname “Waterwheel,” and Arcus remembered him well as the magician to ask the most pertinent questions at the aethometer’s unveiling. The Langula House had a history of instructing the royal children in magic, which would explain why he was here now—he was obliged to keep an eye on the prince’s affairs.

Arcus ran into him immediately after the audience with Ceylan.

“I believe this is our first meeting since the presentation at the Magician’s Guild.”

“Yes, My Lord. I am incredibly grateful for everything Your Lordship has done for me.”

“On the contrary, I owe you a great deal. Thanks to you, I have been able to rework and improve upon my spells, and teach some on to His Royal Highness with very little trouble. I should be thanking you.”

“As a magician, I am glad to have been of service.”

Unfortunately Roheim had other matters to attend to, and could not give Arcus much more of his time than that.

The war council had gathered in the war room in Nalvarond’s castle. A square

table stood in the middle of that room and seated the various leading nobles and feudal lords. Ceylan sat a short distance from the table. Next to him stood Eulid Rain, the young prodigy who commanded the imperial guard, and the third state magician, Roheim Langula. Louise Rustinell, the next highest-ranking person present, was stationed near the prince.

Everyone in this room would command troops during the upcoming battle—and for some reason, Arcus found himself among them. As he wasn't of a rank to be commanding anyone himself, he wasn't allowed to sit, but instead stood with Noah to watch next to Deet, who was also here to observe, but had a seat of his own.

As for Cazzy, he had decided of his own volition to skip the proceedings, citing them as a “pain in the ass.” Arcus took that to mean he would feel out of place, and so he let Cazzy go off and find some other useful work to get on with.

Rather than that, Arcus was curious as to why he was being given special treatment. Deet, he could understand; he was Louise's son, after all. However, while Arcus had assisted in the prince's escape from Nadar, he was the son of a low-ranking noble on top of being disinherited. Being asked to stay by the prince's side during the upcoming fight was already extraordinary in itself, but being allowed to listen in on a war council meeting should have been far above his position. However, Ceylan had told him to sit in, and so he had no choice, and he couldn't help but feel awkward and out of place.

Ceylan, meanwhile, listened calmly to the meeting and occasionally raised an objection or voted on the lords' ideas. Now and then he would ask for clarification on the meaning behind certain ideas, but other than that he didn't speak up unless necessary. All in all, he was doing a good job of leading the council.

Maybe they have that rule in place here that the leaders aren't supposed to get too involved in the actual plans behind military matters...

It was an idea Arcus knew from the most famous book on war from the man's world. According to that book, in order for a campaign to be successful, the details of the military tactics were to be decided by the generals, with rulers kept at a safe distance from the executive process.

Suppose a monarch did get actively involved in a war council meeting. Because of their rank, their word would take precedence over the generals, and if they commented on every last thing, it would cause friction. Monarchs generally also had little knowledge of warfare, and so any plans they came up with had a disproportionate failure rate.

The Crosellode House, however, used to be a martial one on the same level as the Rustinell lords. As long as Ceylan had a solid education in military matters, then his objections would be heeded without discontent, and he wouldn't suggest anything that guaranteed failure. As such, Arcus had the impression that his keeping quiet was more so that the meeting could continue running smoothly.

"How likely is it that the Empire will take advantage of this situation to send in troops?"

"I don't believe there's any risk of that. The Empire is already involved in two separate conflicts. I would wager they don't have the people or the resources to burden themselves with another."

"And what are Nadar's real numbers? So far, we've heard they're less than ours."

"Is that right?"

"I believe so, if we take into account both the soldiers he has conscripted and the mercenaries he's hired."

After confirming what they were dealing with, the discussion moved on to the plan itself.

"How should we attack?"

"Why don't we set up a camp here first?"

"We could wait for the center to send reinforcements."

As the nobles discussed, Ceylan stepped in to suggest what their initial objectives should be. "It is vital that we start by taking the Tab stronghold on the edge of Nadar. We'll break through each objective one by one and make a steady advance. I trust you all have a good idea of how to do that?"

The Tab stronghold was a fortress that stood in the choke point from Nadar into Rustinell; all land traffic had to pass through there.

“Sir, we have received word that Nadar’s forces are moving more quickly than we anticipated,” Eulid reported.

“Oh?”

“Should they continue at the pass, I do not believe we can make it to the Tab stronghold in time.”

“And if we were to send an advance force?”

“While such a force may be able to break through the guards and take the stronghold, they are unlikely to be able to hold it for long. The enemy will take it back almost immediately.”

“Understood. I was hoping to take it before the enemy had set up its defenses, but no matter. In that case, where are we likely to meet them?”

“We should be able to make it to the Mildoor Plains around the time Nadar’s army has finished setting up its encampment around the stronghold.”

“They are moving fast...”

“We’ll only be at the plains...”

The nobles began to murmur amongst themselves.

“Eulid. You mean to say the first battle will be fought when we reach the stronghold?” Ceylan asked.

“We cannot overlook the possibility.”

Some of the nobles groaned audibly at the prospect of storming the fortress. Breaking through the guard was one thing, but trying to attack an occupied stronghold was something else. The attacking side needed a suitable number of soldiers, and the casualties would be great. It was especially unwelcome news for lower-ranking nobles like the barons and baronets, who possessed few men to start with.

“We’ll be fighting them at the stronghold after all.” Ceylan sighed.

“At the very least, we should take solace in the fact that we won’t be fighting

at Nadar's castle."

As it was a war of subjugation they were prosecuting, the lords should have foreseen that fighting right on Nadar's doorstep would be a possibility, but even fighting at the stronghold was enough to have them moaning. Arcus thought that much should have been obvious to these martial families familiar with war and tactics, but apparently he was mistaken.

Arcus suddenly remembered the day he made the decision to come to Rustinell. He'd left the store with Sue, and the two of them had started talking strategy. She'd said:

"Huh? What? Does the Raytheft House really have strategic guides like that?"

She'd made it sound as if the existence of such books was unheard of. If that was true, then what was obvious to Arcus might not have been so obvious after all, even to martial houses. He'd never seen those kinds of books sold in bookstores here either. Perhaps it was the man's world which was strange, allowing materials containing what should have been secret strategies to fall into the hands of the general public.

Just then, Count Bowe spoke out over the grumblings at the table.

"There is nothing to fear in attacking the stronghold. We have plenty of men. All we need to do is cut down anybody who stands in our way. Don't you agree?"

"That's right. We have more men than they do."

"Even a frontal attack shouldn't be a problem for us."

A few nobles shared their agreement.

"Let me ask you, all who are gathered," Ceylan said. "How would you attack the Tab stronghold?"

One of the higher-ranking nobles gave his answer.

"Sir, I think we should break through using siege engines and magical troops, and keep up the invasion as soon as we are through. If we make a show of our power in these early stages, it could well break down enemy morale. No force can withstand a siege long when their spirit is broken."

“Yes, I can see that. Destroying as much of the stronghold as possible would be rather amusing, I might add.”

“Haha. With Your Royal Highness’s power, we could even see the destruction of an entire continent.”

“Sir, if the enemy has no hope of receiving reinforcements, we have the option of approaching things more slowly. For example, surrounding the stronghold and waiting for Porque Nadar to use up all of his resources.”

“Hm. I do like the sound of slow-cooked pork.”

“We may be looking at slow-cooked frog, sir. But even that would be worth seeing.”

A ripple of laughter spread through the lords. While the humor skewed dark, it did well to relieve some of the tension in the air. Ceylan’s joke encouraged more of the nobles to come forward with their ideas.

“Your Royal Highness.”

“Count Bowe. Speak. What is your idea?”

“Sir, I do not think we need any fancy tricks for this particular fight. As I mentioned before, we have the numbers advantage. We can simply employ standard siege tactics.”

“Hmm.”

“The common strategies are common precisely because they are tried and tested. We simply follow the example set by those who came before us.”

“That is certainly one way of looking at things. With a secure plan like that, the nobles who are not here can be sure that my rule is a steadfast one.”

“Indeed, sir!”

Once the lords had shared their ideas with Ceylan, he turned to Louise.

“What are your thoughts, Louise? I would like to hear your honest opinion.”

“Yes, sir. When dealing with a stronghold, I believe it is important to implement as many safeguards as we can, and it will be vital to lure their soldiers out of the city. Our first step should be to make their soldiers and

officers feel that they *do not want* to be inside the fortress.”

“I see. What do you think of the idea of using siege engines and magical troops, in that case?”

“Siege engines are expensive in terms of labor and money, and using our magical troops so early would force them out of action at a time we may really need them. If we are after a spectacular and elegant victory, we ought to be careful with our calculations and organization.”

“What about a slow siege?”

“That would be a good strategy if we wish to limit our losses. However, sustaining a siege is expensive, and may prove to be quite the burden on our viscounts and the nobles beneath them. I also believe that Your Royal Highness’s reputation may come to be at risk if we are seen dragging our heels.”

“That is true. There are many factors to consider.” Ceylan’s voice was thoughtful.

The way Louise conducted herself was impressive. She didn’t dismiss the other nobles’ ideas outright, instead clearly presenting the good with the bad and leaving the final decision up to Ceylan. She’d avoided offending any of the nobles who gave their ideas, and prevented them from losing face. Out of all the martial houses here, Rustinell House had the most impressive track record, so the other lords had no choice but to hear out its head’s opinions.

“However...” Louise continued.

“Yes?”

“All the opinions we have heard so far are based on the assumption that we will fight at the stronghold.”

“Oh? Elaborate.”

“Forgive me, sir, but I am not entirely convinced that things will be that simple.”

“Lady Louise,” Count Bowe cut in. “Nadar is coming to attack; it is only natural that his first port of call would be to secure and hold Tab. I should like to hear

why Your Ladyship thinks otherwise.”

“Just a hunch.”

“A...‘hunch’?” Count Bowe repeated, his eyelashes trembling slightly, as if he thought Louise had just slighted him.

But Louise’s expression was calm as she explained. “Hm? Hunches are important when you go out to fight, you know. Though I guess a hunch shouldn’t be the basis for your entire plan of attack.”

“This is a war council! I hardly think bringing up a ‘hunch’ is appropriate!”

“Yeah, you’re right. But I’m sure I’m not the only one who feels like there’s something off here. Right?”

A few of the lords began to murmur.

“That’s right...”

“It might be too hasty to assume a fight at the stronghold...”

“Louise.”

“Sir. I ask only that Your Royal Highness keeps my concerns in mind.”

Despite Louise’s words, the meeting continued under the assumption that they would be fighting at Tab. While the discussions moved smoothly, Arcus couldn’t help but worry they were heading in the wrong direction.

Firstly, there were the movements of Nadar’s army. If the conversation so far was to be believed, it was Nadar’s intent to march on Rustinell’s capital.

“He’s coming all the way down here instead of holing up in his castle, which would be easier to defend?” Arcus whispered to Noah.

“It appears so.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense.” Arcus let out the sigh he had been holding in.

If he were Porque Nadar in this situation, he wouldn’t march down to meet the troops planning to subjugate him. His first priority would be bolstering his defenses. The easiest place to meet the enemy would be in Nadar castle, which had the best defenses in the entire county. If he could hold out against the

enemy attack and use that time to gather reinforcements from a country hostile to the kingdom, he might have a chance of victory. Considering Nadar's alleged connections with the Empire, Arcus couldn't see why he'd use any other strategy. Why not make use of those connections and then escape? Arcus couldn't work it out.

"Master Arcus. A penny for your thoughts?"

"Huh?! Wait, I wanna hear this!" Deet swung around to hear what Arcus had to say.

"It's nothing really. I was just wondering why Nadar's side is being so proactive," he explained. "Normally in a situation like this, you'd hole up in your castle or get in quick to try and pick off enemies one by one before they have time to gather together. Nadar took a while to get the men he needed, so it would make sense for him to focus on defense, but instead he's actively marching to meet us. I just don't get what he's trying to do."

"Isn't it just that he knows he's screwed eventually, so he might as well come put up a fight?" said Deet.

"Then wouldn't he pick somewhere other than the Mildoor Plains to stage the battle? But he's taking over the Tab stronghold... What's it like, anyway?"

"Hm, well..." Deet began. "It's not the best place to mount a defense. It's fine temporarily, but there are other places further back which are better equipped, and you can't even post that many people there. I wouldn't pick it as a base, and I think that's also why mom doesn't seem sure about this whole thing."

"Right, so there are better places deeper in Nadar to hold. Which means there's gotta be a reason why they can't."

The Tab stronghold had poor defenses, and there was nothing but plains to its east. Numbers invariably held the advantage on flat land: the one thing Nadar didn't have. A fight on the plains was something Nadar's side should want to avoid at all costs. Yet still they were marching.

"There's gotta be a reason that Nadar has to meet the prince's army fast. A reason that only came up recently. You often hear about sides trying to end a fight quickly if they're worried they're gonna run out of resources, but I don't

think that's the case here. Otherwise it's because they want to rush in and grab a good defensive position, but we already know it's the wrong spot for that. All that's there is this paltry Tab stronghold..."

While wartime strategy and military doctrine were not widespread in this world and some degree of naivety might be expected, Nadar had been put in charge of his own territory; Arcus found it difficult to believe he was doing this out of foolishness. There had to be some kind of meaning behind his movements. Nadar was rushing, and the simplest explanation for that was that he was running short on time. In this fight, the passage of time put him at a disadvantage, because he was expecting his opponent to gain reinforcements from other territories. The enemy would only become more numerous the longer he waited. Would those extra numbers prevent him from doing something specific, perhaps?

The most obvious answer was that it would be harder to defeat the opposing forces, but Arcus quickly dismissed that idea. That was going to be difficult enough for Nadar's troops in the first place. Without his own reinforcements or bolstered defenses, he simply wouldn't be fighting them on equal terms.

It couldn't be that he was rushing to secure strategic points either, due to the points Deet had raised about the Tab stronghold earlier. There were no further places to capture in front of the Tab stronghold either, so it wasn't even useful as a stepping stone.

So what was the reason? What did Porque Nadar want more than anything else right now? What was it that would slip out of his grasp if the opposing force gathered more soldiers, if it wasn't victory or strategic position?

"The prince's head..." Arcus murmured.

He suddenly realized the lords at the table were staring at him. Arcus froze, and the next second Ceylan was looking at him too. The tension in the room rose sharply in the blink of an eye, and Arcus wondered if the nobles were angry at him for voicing his thoughts out loud. But then he realized they seemed just as tense as he did; not one of them offered a word of caution or rebuttal. The oppressive air came from one source only: Ceylan Crosellode himself.

“Arcus.” The prince’s voice was calm, monotonous; perhaps even a little cold as he spoke Arcus’s name. It only added more weight to the realization that Arcus should’ve kept his mouth shut. At the very least, he could’ve chosen better words to say aloud than “the prince’s head.”

Uh oh...

Arcus regretted thinking so hard in the first place, but there was nothing he could do about it now. The temperature in the room seemed to drop as Arcus stiffened and prepared himself for a scolding, worrying at the same time that his silence was only going to make things worse. Deciding to apologize, he was about to take a hurried step forward when Noah got in first, placing one knee on the floor.

“Your Royal Highness. Please forgive our impudence of holding a private conversation in the midst of this war council.”

“Hm.”

“I am at fault for encouraging my master to speak. I only ask that I bear any rightful punishment Your Royal Highness sees fit rather than him.”

“Noah...”

Noah didn’t turn around at the sound of his name, but held his position fast, a sign to reassure Arcus that he would take care of things. Hot guilt rushed through him.

“You were Noah Ingvayne, yes?” Ceylan inquired.

“Sir! I can think of no greater honor than Your Royal Highness remembering my name.”

“Of course I remember. A gifted student, you graduated with top honors from the Institute, and received training from both Crucible and Peacemaker. They call you the Winter Wunderkind. I am not foolish enough to forget the name of a magician with such rare talent.”

“Sir...” Noah bowed his head deeply.

The surrounding lords reacted with surprise, both at the fact that Ceylan would remember the name of a mere servant, and that said servant had

connections to not one, but two state magicians. The room was filled with murmurs of admiration and interest, which Ceylan quickly put a stop to.

“Stand down. I was addressing Arcus.”

“Sir—”

“I find your readiness to protect your master admirable. However, I do not wish to repeat myself.”

“Yes, sir.”

Noah had no choice but to back down. Any other action would have worsened the situation. Noah returned to Arcus’s side and turned his gaze away apologetically. He must have felt just as guilty as Arcus did.

“Wait, sir!” Deet interjected in a hurry. “Arcus was only, um...”

He clearly hadn’t considered his words before speaking. All that came after that were more “um”s and “er”s.

“Dietria. Do not open your mouth before you have decided what you wish to say.”

“Er...um...”

Arcus gave Deet a quiet “thanks,” before stepping forward and taking a knee right in the center of all the anxiety and awkwardness. He opened his mouth to apologize, but was interrupted by Ceylan.

“Well, Arcus? You had more to say, did you not? What are you doing?”

“Huh?”

Ceylan’s prompt was completely unexpected. Arcus thought he would be scolded, if not outright punished, for his careless remark, but the reality ended up being the opposite. Ceylan even seemed confused by his move to apologize. It sounded like the prince wanted him to speak, and the next second, he was proven right.

“Arcus. I wish to hear what you have to say.”

“B-But, sir—”

“It is my view that you have nothing to apologize for. Unless your words just

now were borne of some unforgivable, violent fantasy to do me harm?”

“Oh, n-no, sir! Of course not!”

“Then speak. Your point of view is vital to our grasp of the situation.”

“Y-Yes, sir!” Arcus stood up. He couldn’t see how his blunder *hadn’t* been seen as rude. Exchanging a quick glance with Noah and Deet, he breathed a small sigh of relief before continuing. “Sir. What I am about to say is a slight tangent to what has been discussed so far. May I?”

“Go on. This is all in aid of understanding the situation, as I have said. You may speak freely.” Ceylan shifted his chair so he faced Arcus straight on.

Arcus took a deep breath before speaking again. “My words earlier related to some doubts I hold about Porque Nadar’s motive. As has been discussed, Nadar is marching toward Rustinell, and I was wondering why exactly that might be.”

“Surely it is because he wishes to meet my troops and fight?”

“If that were the case, I do not believe he would feel the need to move quite so quickly. Your Royal Highness’s troops would come to meet him in any case, and all he would have to do would be to prepare thoroughly for them.”

“Yes, that makes sense. With his scant numbers, fighting from his castle would be most optimal. However, it would not make as much sense when he has no hope of seeing reinforcements. Otherwise he would exhaust his men and gain nothing. We could simply surround him and chip away at his defenses. In this particular fight, such a plan would be unwise.”

“I agree completely, sir. However, even if Nadar has realized such a thing, his reaction in moving his men seems too delayed. If he had acted the moment Your Royal Highness retreated to Rustinell, he might have been able to block our movements, or whittle our forces down before they gathered, but he’s lost the opportunity now.”

“Indeed. His movements seem illogical. Unless, of course, he simply wished to take his men for a walk.”

If there was one way to sum up Nadar’s movements, it would be “indecisive.” Forcing a siege at his castle would have been the best bet, but it sounded like

he'd barely even considered it. On top of that, he'd waited for Ceylan's army to gather before doing anything, which was nothing short of suicidal.

The lords began to voice their own opinions on the matter.

"That is only assuming Porque Nadar has thought things through properly!"

"Yes. I can well see somebody as pig-headed as him moving his men in the manner that he has."

"I believe you are overthinking the situation. I doubt Porque Nadar has any sort of plan."

They were unanimously against Arcus. He agreed there was a chance he was overthinking things. Perhaps he realized he wasn't getting reinforcements, left the safety of his castle, and charged toward Rustinell out of desperation. But if that were true and he wasn't thinking, the prince's side wouldn't have to bother worrying about what sort of plan he might have. And that just seemed all too convenient.

However, the majority of the lords seemed to think Nadar was a brainless fool.

"He's just a child."

"We need not listen to him."

They began to murmur among themselves again.

"Sir, I do not believe we should be thinking too deeply into this situation," one of the lords began, addressing Ceylan. "If this child may be asked to—"

"Silence," Ceylan snapped.

That one word was enough for Arcus to feel like there was a millstone around his neck. Whether Ceylan thought the nobles were being too loud or he objected to them interrupting his conversation with Arcus, the room was filled with a suffocating, near-physical weight which put an immediate end to the heated discussion.

"I'm afraid I let my temper run away with me." With those words, the weight in the room vanished immediately, as though it had never been there in the first place. Ceylan turned to the lords again. "There is truth in what you say.

Porque Nadar is a foolish pig who dared to turn his blade toward the crown, and Arcus may well be overthinking the matter. That is why I wish to listen to those most knowledgeable about the topic of battle. Louise. Roheim, my professor. Should we continue on this line of discussion, or should we move on?"

Unwilling to completely ignore the lords' opinions, Ceylan sought the support of the higher-ranking individuals. One was a monarch and Lainur's western bulwark, and the other was a state magician with a great deal of battle experience. If they agreed to keep speaking on the subject, the lords would no longer be in a place to complain.

"I believe there is merit in listening to everything Arcus Raytheft has to say," Louise said. "Even if the enemy is a fool, we cannot let his advance trip us up. I believe we ought to explore every possibility we can."

"Professor?"

"As Your Royal Highness knows, I like to focus on the finer details wherever possible. As with magic, I do not like to move things forward where obscurity remains. At the very least, I believe there is merit in hearing what the boy has to say."

"Very well. There you have it." Ceylan turned to the lords. "Will you agree to let Arcus speak now?"

Sure enough, the lords were unable to raise any more objections.

"Now where were we, Arcus? You were saying the movements of Nadar's army lacked consistency."

"Yes, sir. I was wondering why he would march instead of sheltering in his castle."

"The only conclusion I can come to is that it is due to his lack of reinforcements."

"I agree, sir, but there might be another reason."

"We have already ascertained that reinforcements are out of the question. Every noble in the kingdom is against him, and we have blocked off the lines of

communication between him and them. Furthermore, the Empire behind his county is in no position to provide him with troops.”

“Indeed, sir, but there is still a connection between them.”

“A connection?” Ceylan leaned forward, his brow creasing in thought.

“Porque Nadar was selling silver illegally to the Empire. To do so, there must be some sort of channel between them. This is just conjecture, but if there is a communication channel, then Nadar has had the chance to finish negotiations with the Empire. As part of such a deal, Nadar would probably ask for his guaranteed safety and position once this is all over, as well as reinforcements for the current fight.”

“Yes, that would make sense, assuming his plan is to defect. However, I would not expect the Empire to agree to his requests, given that it is already engaging in warfare elsewhere.”

“What if the Empire did not outright refuse, but agreed while affixing additional conditions? For example, if he agreed to hand Your Royal Highness over to them?”

“Porque Nadar would come rushing recklessly for my head. I see! So that’s what’s going on!” Ceylan seemed to have put the rest of the pieces together himself. There was even a spark of excitement in his tone. “Arcus. Are you saying that Nadar is marching because he wants my head?”

“Yes, sir. That is what I have surmised, listening to the discussion so far. At first, he did nothing because he was still expecting reinforcements from the Empire. But when they gave him a condition for those reinforcements, he moved immediately to fulfill it.”

“I see. That would certainly explain his actions.”

“I believe it to be quite likely. This entire ordeal started with Nadar attempting to trap Your Royal Highness. Even if the Empire does not respond well later, he would be able to leverage Your Royal Highness as a hostage to afford himself some sort of breakthrough. Either way, he would need to march to fulfill his goal.”

“I see. Even without the Empire’s involvement, Nadar would gain from

capturing me.”

No matter the finer details of the situation, this was Nadar’s best bet. Arcus wasn’t yet ready to dismiss the idea that this might be the result of a deal with the Empire either. By offering the prince’s head to the hostile power right at the start of the conflict, he could gain their favor. It might even encourage the kingdom’s other enemies, such as Granciel and the eastern Han tribe to make a move as well.

As Ceylan spoke, some of the lords seemed to catch on too. Those who had initially wanted Arcus to step down were now staring wide-eyed. While Louise and Roheim already seemed satisfied, there were still those who disagreed.

Bowe stood up as if to speak on their behalf, and made no attempt to hide his exasperation. “Sir. Perhaps we have established a motive, but that is all. I do not think that is something that requires discussion at a war council meeting.”

Gasps filled the air.

“Huh? Are you for real right now?!” Louise cried.

“This is important information to help us form a strategy,” Eulid said.

“Indeed,” Ceylan agreed. “Arcus. Calling you into this meeting was evidently the right choice. I feel you have opened our eyes.”

“Wh...” Count Bowe began, clearly dismayed at what was going on around him. Meanwhile, the lords who had agreed all along were dismayed at him.

Roheim, who up until now had been quiet unless called upon, spoke then. “Is this your first time in a conflict like this one, Count Bowe?”

“L-Let it be known I have been in one or two battles before!” Bowe narrowed his eyes.

Roheim returned his glare evenly, at which point Bowe let out a whimper and huddled back. His outburst must have been the result of an impulsive anger. Louise and her subordinate lords were enough to intimidate him before, so of course he couldn’t stand up to a state magician’s beastly presence.

“Allow me to summarize the situation and make sure everyone present is on the same page,” Roheim said, turning his gaze away from the count. “Young

Arcus's suggestion flips this conflict on its head. Porque Nadar's current movements are unnatural and suggest a lack of self-preservation. Of all the options available to him, he has chosen one of the most unwise. So why did he make that decision? Possibly because the Empire has asked for His Royal Highness either to be killed or taken hostage. Are we all agreed so far?"

The lords voiced their agreement.

"And why should this make it easier for us to strategize? Well, without a good grasp of Nadar's motives, our only choices involved fighting back. Now, however, we can counter Nadar's motives in our plan. In short, we have more options."

"Count Langula, I fail to see—"

The persistent Bowe was cut off by a disappointed gaze.

"It should be obvious. Porque Nadar is targeting His Royal Highness. From that, we can gather that where His Royal Highness is, Nadar and his men will follow. Now, what advantage would that give *us*, do you think?"

"W-We get to decide where the deciding battle should be fought."

"That is not all, however," Roheim paused. "I am willing to give you half marks."

Count Bowe failed to bring his reasoning one step further and realize that it also meant they could tactically control the enemy army's movements. Being battered from all sides by opposing remarks seemed to have flustered him. Though he held himself confidently when greeting the prince, perhaps he wasn't as used to these situations as he liked to pretend.

Roheim turned to look at Arcus then. "A question, if I may."

"F-For me?"

"Given that you have perceived as much from the situation as you have, I am sure you have some idea as to what the opposing armies will do next. I wonder if you can answer me this: If your supposition is correct, what will happen from here on?"

"My Lord. Even if our side moves out, I do not believe we will be fighting at

the Tab stronghold. If Nadar is targeting His Royal Highness, I think we can safely expect him to be more aggressive than we were originally prepared for. He will try to fight us as soon as he can, and so I believe we must act more quickly than him and prepare to meet his men.”

“I agree. It would be most troublesome if we were caught unprepared and forced into battle somewhere unforeseen.” Satisfied with Arcus’s response, Roheim nodded.

While being questioned like that by the state magician gave Arcus an odd sense of déjà vu, the threat of a surprise attack was more pressing. The biggest dangers would come if they were attacked while moving or setting up camp. Their soldiers would be scattered and unprepared, while the attacking enemy forces would be fully equipped and ready for battle. Your average soldier would be hard-pressed to think of a more nightmarish situation; there would be no time to take up their weapons or equip their armor. If they even tried, they would be utterly destroyed before they could. That was why ascertaining when and where the enemy would attack was so important.

Just some more stuff I picked up from books...

The benevolent Sun Tzu again. It made Arcus wonder what was up with the ancient people of the man’s world. Why were they all so impossibly smart?

“Arcus.”

“Sir?”

“Question. If it were up to you, where would you designate as the first battlefield for this war?”

Arcus began to demonstrate with the map and tokens laid out on the table. “As our numbers are greater, I would suggest the Mildoor Plains, sir.”

“Hm. Is there no better place? One which would grant us the opportunity to catch the enemy off guard?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Very well. I suppose playing it safe is a viable strategy too.” The tone in Ceylan’s response suggested he was enjoying himself, but it was gone when he

presented Arcus with his next question. “I would like to shave away some of Nadar’s numbers in advance. What would you suggest?”

“Perhaps a strategy for sowing discord.”

“I see. However, I do not believe that to be necessary; Nadar has put himself on that path already.”

“Should I suggest something else, sir?”

“Yes. Go ahead.”

Arcus paused to think before giving his answer. “I’m afraid this might be incredibly discourteous to suggest, sir. With Your Royal Highness’s permission, however, I would like to speak.”

“Go on. You may speak completely freely.”

“In that case, please excuse me. My suggestion would be to create a group of ‘false princes,’ and send them sporadically into Nadar.”

“Oh?”

The lords around them gasped at Arcus’s curious suggestion. They seemed to find it discourteous indeed.

“Why, you! How dare you suggest something so outrageously insolent?!” Bowe leaped up to shout at Arcus, and several other lords made to follow suit.

“Silence! Have you forgotten that His Royal Highness gave this boy permission to speak freely?!” Eulid said.

“Ugh...”

With that, order was restored, and Arcus continued.

“Given his goals, Nadar will immediately send soldiers wherever he thinks Your Royal Highness is. We can lure them wherever we like and pick them off, and then we will be facing far fewer soldiers when it comes to the deciding battle.”

“But once he’s realized he’s dealing with a fake, he won’t fall for the same trick twice,” Louise warned.

“My Lady. I have read accounts in strategic books of soldiers losing their

morale in the face of their commanders treating them as disposable. Even if Nadar knows he's walking into a trap, as long as he lacks the sympathy to sustain his soldiers' favor, he has no choice but to rise to his enemy's challenge."

"Hm. If he ignores the challenges, the troops will think he lacks trust in their strength," Ceylan said. "If he sends them out, they will feel like he does not value their lives. I can see where you are coming from."

Nadar's current position was disadvantageous. Facing an enemy as powerful as the kingdom, he was at risk of desertion at any given moment. He needed to be on his guard constantly just to maintain his numbers. While there was no guarantee he could be easily goaded, the possibility was high enough.

Louise let out an impressed hum. Bowe was, naturally, less impressed.

"That's ridiculous. What if Nadar sends out his troops to one of these 'challenges' in great numbers? How are we supposed to 'pick them off' then?"

"The more men you move, the more difficult it is. Gathering men takes a considerable amount of time, and that goes for both armies. We should send our men in smaller groups to meet Nadar's troops," Arcus said.

"What?" Bowe gasped.

He was an incredibly unperceptive man. Arcus could barely believe he was a military man himself.

Arcus decided to explain again, this time making the information more digestible for the count, just as Roheim had before. "The more men in one's troops, the longer it takes to move them. As His Royal Highness has already said, moving one large group toward several smaller ones scattered out is difficult. Your Lordship can imagine it from our side too; if we were to do the same thing, our movements would become clumsy. Slower."

"How dare you insult the men led by His Royal Highness?!"

Give me strength...

Arcus let out a deep, silent sigh. It was hard to have a constructive conversation with these people. They would just claim anything they didn't like

was a slight against their superiors, and use that chance to move the discourse in their chosen direction. It was utterly tiresome, and personally Arcus didn't want to associate with people who played such petty tricks. But then, this man wasn't Arcus's current conversation partner in the first place. He had been trying to answer Ceylan's question when Bowe jumped in with one of his own. There was no need to turn his focus away from the prince.

"Sir?"

"Continue." Having guessed what Arcus was thinking, Ceylan nodded. Arcus now had permission to ignore Count Bowe.

"We still have some time before Nadar's troops approach the Mildoor Plains. I believe the best strategy would be to use that time to separate his men, pare down his forces as best we can, and commence the final battle before he has time to gather his bearings." Only when Arcus finished explaining did he feel the weight of all the eyes settled on him.

All those eyes were open wide with astonishment, as if they could not believe a child capable of coming up with such a plan. At the very least, he was relieved that none of the lords were scoffing at his idea.

"Interesting. Very interesting," Ceylan murmured. "However, that is all it is. There is no guarantee that we will be able to lure the enemy soldiers, and if we are to go ahead with this plan, we will have to revisit the composition of our men. We have not the time for that anymore. It is an interesting plan indeed, but not a serviceable one."

"Yes, sir. Please allow me to apologize for wasting Your Royal Highness's time with my naivety."

"No need. I said you were to speak freely."

"Yes, sir." Arcus bowed his head.

It wasn't like he'd expected the prince to just accept his plan without question. At the end of the day, it was nothing more than an untested theory. What he hadn't reckoned with was how exhausting speaking with royalty could be. Everything he said had to come across in the most humbling way imaginable, and every word had to be mulled over before he spoke.

“Hmph. Foolish child.”

Not to mention Count Bowe’s need to comment on absolutely everything was starting to severely tick him off. Perhaps it was his comments when Arcus stepped forward to greet the prince that made him overly conscious of the count now. Perhaps he would warn Noah and Cazzy to be careful around him once the meeting was over.

Arcus was then ordered to step down, at which point he returned to his original position.

“If Nadar is coming for us, might we not consider drawing him into Rustinell itself and holding the first encounter here?” Eulid suggested. “If *we* are the ones to occupy a stronghold and we allow them to attack, it may work out in our favor.”

“No, I still believe the Mildoor Plains is where we ought to fight,” Ceylan said. “With the lords on our side, we have plenty of fighting power. To hole up in a castle despite that would show cowardice on our part.”

Ceylan then stood up to make a declaration to all assembled. “I shall say it once more. Our purpose in this fight is to subjugate the cowardly traitor. Naturally, we shall plan for victory, but it would not do to lose sight of our objective. We must be assertive in our fight against Nadar; we must crush him with all our might. Only then can we call this operation a success.”

Ceylan had declared war on Porque Nadar, but defeating Nadar was simply the means by which the prince’s true goal would be achieved: to show the entire kingdom—no, the entire *world*—that the crown would not allow traitors to draw breath within its borders.

Nadar’s subjugation had to come to pass. The prince ordering his troops to hole up in a castle, even if it was an effective method to buy time for the main army to join them, would mean allowing Nadar to attack first. The circumstances didn’t matter; the singular truth of Nadar’s opening blow had the power to damage the prince’s reputation. It risked things snowballing into apprehensive rumors that Ceylan was weak and unfit to lead troops. The fact that Ceylan’s side outnumbered Nadar’s would just add to the vitality of those rumors. Ceylan couldn’t afford to fight this war passively.

War was a branch of politics. It was often said that crushing the enemy should not be an objective, but a means to an end. In this fight, losing was not an option, but a lazy victory could prove to be even worse. They had to attack, attack, attack with everything they had. Only then would their victory have any merit. Their means of victory was just as important as the victory itself, and that made things difficult.

“Let me ask you. Where should we fight the decisive battle? If you can think of anywhere else, do not hesitate to speak.”

One by one, the lords gave their support to fight at the Mildoor Plains. As long as they had the numbers advantage, it was a no-brainer. Finally, Ceylan and the lords decided on their next steps and their tactics for the decisive battle. The prince then declared the closing of the war council.

“This meeting was fruitful indeed. Next time, I ought to have a seat prepared for Arcus at the table.”

Wait, what?

Ceylan’s final words left Arcus’s head full of nothing but questions.

Ceylan had given Arcus what he supposed was meant as praise. But it wasn’t just Ceylan whom he’d impressed; he found himself approached by several lords even after he left the room. Before he knew it, he’d been completely surrounded, which terrified him for the brief moment he thought he was being threatened.

“You displayed an incredibly keen sense of perception.”

“You have fantastic knowledge of military matters for one your age.”

“I see now why His Royal Highness requested that you fight at his side.”

The lords introduced themselves before lavishing Arcus with praise. There were even some he heard ponder aloud why he was deemed “talentless.” He was grateful that the better part of the people he’d known took the time to let him explain his circumstances and draw their own conclusions. It was a sign that, as long as he put in the work to raise his reputation, those rumors might eventually become a thing of the past. His experience in the war council sparked that still-tiny hope inside him.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Among the lords was more than one who sought him out deliberately to give a less positive message.

That evening, Arcus retired to the chambers reserved for him on the lord of Nalvarond’s estate. As he was here as Louise’s guest, he received more favorable treatment than the lower-ranking nobles who’d come to fight. Louise even offered a place in Nalvarond’s castle, but Arcus declined, fearing he might become the object of jealousy. He was the son of a low-ranking noble; he didn’t belong in the same building as Ceylan and those of higher status.

Arcus’s room was magnificent. Its twenty square meters held four beds, a couch, a table, and several chairs. In the corners of the room were Sol Glasses set behind blackout curtains, which Arcus would be drawing very soon—but right now he was sitting in one of the chairs and enjoying some well-earned peace.

“Sorry about what happened at the council. I didn’t think anyone was listening.”

“Not at all,” Noah replied. “Please allow me to apologize for not acting with due care. I neglected prudence in order to satisfy my curiosity by asking for your thoughts, and in doing so I failed in my duty as your servant.”

While Noah had been his usual composed self even after the meeting, Arcus noticed he hadn’t been speaking as much as he tended to. Noah hadn’t done anything wrong, but apparently he was feeling guilty about it.

Meanwhile, Arcus’s other attendant was currently playing battle chess with Galanger.

“So?” Cazzy cackled. “Ya put on a show in front of the prince, did ya? It’s like every day ya do somethin’ worth talkin’ about.”

“It wasn’t a *show*,” Arcus insisted.

“It *was*! You had the whole room hanging on your every word after the halfway point! And mom was saying all this nice stuff about you after! You know how mean she is usually! Right?” Deet turned to Galanger to back him up.

Galanger nodded; it was clear the news of Louise's praise surprised him. "Yes. If ma'am praised you, you must have done well. There. Your magician is mine."

"Ugh. Shoulda seen that coming." Cazzy scowled as Galanger helped himself to one of his pieces.

"I just pointed out the stuff I thought didn't make sense," Arcus said.

"Perhaps; however, all of your points were highly pertinent. They even influenced the operation's overarching plan."

"I learned tons more from that war council than any other," Deet added. "His Royal Highness was great as the chairman, but it was all the stuff you said that stuck with me."

"I was just following that one principle, y'know? That the best plan isn't based on how to defeat or invade your opponent's castle, but on reading their plan and making it powerless."

By preempting the enemy's plan and preventing them from realizing it, it followed that they would be unable to make any further movements. Since the current conflict had a political purpose, Ceylan wasn't able to prevent Nadar from targeting him directly, but even just knowing that the count was after the prince in the first place was vital information.

Deet frowned thoughtfully. "We fight a ton where I'm from, but I've never heard about this 'principle.' We just avoid fighting if we think we're gonna lose or it's gonna be too much of a pain. Right?"

"Yes," Galanger agreed. "Military strategy is never that clear-cut."

It's never supposed to be that complicated either...

"I guess it'd all be influenced by the Ancient Chronicles, right?"

"Of course."

"Right."

Now that they were on the topic, Arcus did remember that the Chronicles touched on accounts of war here and there. There were depictions of the Lineal imperial era, during which conflict between humans would be common, in *Demons and Society's Collapse*, the sixth installment. It would be unsurprising

for it to cover matters of military strategy and tactics.

“When you speak about ‘reading your enemy’s plan,’ you mean to keep their objective in mind at all times, yes?” Noah pressed.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Uh,” Cazzy interjected with a frown. “Isn’t that obvious, though?”

“It sounds simple,” said Noah, “but I would wager that not making it a core component of one’s strategy makes it surprisingly forgettable.”

“I see,” said Galanger. “You hear it and it makes sense, but otherwise you don’t really think about it. Once the fighting starts, most people are more concerned with felling the opponents’ soldiers, since the more soldiers you have, the higher your chances of victory. From there, it’s easier to obsess over having the most men and—Oh!”

“Heh. Gotcher heavy cavalry.” Cazzy prodded at the piece on the palm of his hand and grinned. Once he was done being smug at Galanger, he turned back to Arcus. “Seriously though, what’s your deal? I thought your thing was magic, an’ now it turns out ya know about all this other stuff.”

“I must agree. There exist no books on such subjects at the Raytheft Estate, nor at Craib’s abode.”

“Yeah, I remember havin’ a look, but I never saw anythin’ like that.”

Arcus’s servants eyed him skeptically. He averted his gaze and fumbled for an excuse.

“Um... Well, y’know...”

“Ya just gonna say ya saw it somewhere again, are ya?”

“I wouldn’t be lying if I did! It’s not like I could’ve said all that stuff if I *hadn’t* seen it somewhere.”

“Yeah, but that don’t make ya any less fishy.”

“The issue here is that you are unable to show us any physical articles. If those books do not exist with your family, then I cannot help but wonder where you gained such knowledge.”

It didn't matter how much Noah asked for physical proof; it was impossible to show him any. Everything Arcus read on military matters came from books in the man's world. With no way to bring those books here, he had no way to prove anything. Arcus was racking his brains for something to say when Galanger let out a sudden cry.

"Yes! This is it! I've won!"

"Huh? N-No way! Don't tell me lettin' me take that cavalry just now was a trap?!"

Galanger laughed from deep within his belly. "Some things can only be learned from real experience, and not by being top of your class."

Cazzy let out a wordless roar as Galanger gathered up the coins in the middle of the table. Cazzy was good at these games, so Galanger must have been *outstanding*. It looked like a relatively easy victory for him too.

"But yeah, knowing our opponent's moves is really helpful. If we had more time, we could even set a trap or something at the battlefield," Deet said.

"Under different circumstances, we likely would," Galanger agreed.

"Huh?"

Noah turned to Galanger. "I think there might be something to the idea of withdrawing into Rustinell. What are your thoughts on the matter, My Lord?"

"I think it would be a good way to achieve a certain victory. We know the land enough to use it to our advantage, and could force the enemy to attack one of our strongholds. However, much of this fight has to do with His Royal Highness's reputation. There's one thing the kingdom will be looking to do once the fight is over. Do you know what that is?"

"I should suspect they will be conferring honors."

"Exactly right. Additionally, this is His Royal Highness's first fight, a cause for a huge gathering. We will likely see visitors from other lands, so it is no wonder His Royal Highness's honor is at stake."

"In other words, all eyes are on His Royal Highness's strategy."

"King Shinlu is particularly strict when it comes to reputation. Setting up for

an easy victory could earn disdain from outside the kingdom, which limits what His Royal Highness can do, and disqualifies forcing a siege.”

By all accounts, Ceylan was to be launching an assault on Nadar to subjugate him. To then turn around and withdraw back into Rustinell would look cowardly, if nothing else. It meant holding off on attacking, and would even make the lords within the kingdom think he was fooling around. Allowing the enemy to make the first move would be nothing short of a bad joke.

“In some respects, you could say that young Arcus protected His Royal Highness from ridicule today. Not pinning down Nadar’s motives would leave us vulnerable to a surprise attack, which would damage His Royal Highness’s reputation no matter the fight’s outcome. That comment about allowing you a seat at the next meeting may not have been a joke.”

“You’re amazing, Arcus! Once this whole thing is done, it’d be cool if you could join my men! Except I’m guessing that’s not gonna happen...” Deet said.

“Huh?”

“See, after the meeting I asked His Royal Highness about having you, but he said he already had his eye on you, so I wasn’t allowed.”

“You...”

Arcus was incredulous that his own opinion didn’t seem to matter to Deet.

“I didn’t know you’d already started making your move,” Galanger remarked.

“Yeah, ’cause I gotta be quick! Or some other noble or lord’s gonna get in first!”

“Don’t these people ever rest?” Galanger mumbled.

“Oh, but His Royal Highness said no to them too,” Deet muttered.

Deet, nobles, lords, and even Ceylan... Seeing so many people eager to monopolize a young boy like himself made Arcus somewhat uncomfortable, but he had to remind himself that this wasn’t like the man’s world. This was a world where peculiar talents were held in high esteem. People would be after them no matter the subject’s age.

“How come His Royal Highness thinks so much of you, Arcus?”

“Uh, y’know. There’s been stuff.”

“Would it have anything to do with your coming to Rustinell?”

“L-Lord Galanger. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t read so much into things.”

“I’m afraid I cannot do that.” Galanger smirked.

Galanger was a feudal lord with territory himself. While military affairs weren’t necessarily his top priority, he would have his own interests in mind.

Anyway, even if Ceylan’s interest in Arcus was as a result of the aethometer, there was one thing that he still couldn’t wrap his head around. Ceylan knew all about Arcus and his magic-related activities, but that had nothing to do with military matters. So why had the prince called Arcus to a war council and asked for his opinions?

“I sure am jealous that you get to fight beside His Royal Highness,” Deet said.

“Y-Yeah.” Arcus couldn’t think of what else to say.

Deet frowned. “Huh? You don’t seem that happy about it.”

“Well, uh... How come you’re jealous?”

“Of course I’m jealous! It’ll raise your reputation with the royal family, and you’ll gain a connection to them if it goes well! It’s not every day you get a chance like that!”

“Oh.”

Deet made a good point. Arcus hadn’t considered how winning Ceylan’s favor might put him ahead in life. Privilege was everything in this country. How the people around you thought of you was important, but more than that, almost everything was decided by those in high places. There was no safer way to secure one’s reputation than impressing Prince Ceylan himself. That was one way Arcus could shake off his reputation as a failure for good.

He shot Noah and Cazzy a meaningful glance.

“I shall follow wherever you go.”

“You sure, Noah?”

“You are my master. Such is my duty.” An amused smile lit up Noah’s face.

That smile gave away more to his reasoning; he wanted to follow Arcus because it excited him.

“Cazzy?”

“I already invaded that marquess’s place with ya. I knew from the start hangin’ with ya would mean more violence.” He cackled.

Arcus’s servants were both on board, so there was no reason for him to hold back anymore. They were both more used to fighting than he was, and he knew they’d want him to worry more about himself than them.

“By the way, Deet, what are you doing here?” Arcus asked, wanting to clear something up.

“Wait, I’ve been here for ages! Why’re you asking *now*?!” Deet was still rolling around on the bed (that wasn’t his) without a care in the world, especially not one for all the wrinkles he was leaving in the sheets. “Apart from mom, everyone else here is just some old man. Well, there are the female servants, but I feel kinda cramped when they’re around.”

“Which is why we’re here bothering you,” Galanger explained.

Arcus found it slightly concerning that those “old men’s” leader Galanger was here instead of working, but his primary job was to assist Deet, so perhaps this counted as work. Although Arcus wouldn’t go so far as to call playing battle chess with Cazzy assisting Deet.

“Hey, Arcus, how old are you?”

“Huh? I turned twelve this year.”

“Oh, so you’re a year older than me.”

“I am?”

“Yeah! Oh! Does that mean you’ll be my big brother? I mean, you’ve got, like this reliable look about you, so...”

“No way!” Arcus glared at Deet, who burst into laughter. “Look, we’ve got our separate social positions to think about. I know you speak to me casually, but acting like we’re family is a bit too much, y’know.”

“How? We’re similar in age anyway, so why not?”

Arcus didn’t respond; Deet didn’t seem willing to listen to reason no matter how he tried to explain. He was just flailing his limbs around and pouting on the bed. Arcus looked to Galanger for help, but he just let out a resigned sigh.

“I know how to behave properly when it matters.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Thanks, bro!” Deet grinned and rolled about on the bed some more while Arcus lamented the loss of his crisp sheets.

“You sure are excited about this.”

“Deet enjoys a good conflict,” Galanger said.

“Hey, if I do good here, I’ll be set for life, and everyone’ll cheer for me when I come home! Also, if I achieve lots in this fight, I think it’ll make mom feel better too.” Deet’s breathing quickened as he spoke. His motivation for this battle was clearly through the roof.

Deet wasn’t any ordinary child. His upbringing had been a privileged one, and right now he was acting according to his position. He must have been good at what he did too, considering that the adults let him clean up after the incident with Pilocolo at the warehouse, both in terms of fighting and his official duties.

The regional monarchs were obliged to organize fighting power within their territories; not just that of their direct vassals, but that of the smaller families as well. This set them apart from the nobles closer to the kingdom’s heart, and Arcus had heard that their education was stricter because of it. They couldn’t do their jobs if they weren’t taught properly about practical things like politics and diplomacy.

“I owe you a ton, Arcus. Thanks to what happened at the warehouse, I’ve got more chances to go after even bigger and better things!”

“Like enemy heads?”

“You got it!”

Once again, Arcus was reminded of how many violent people there were in this world.

War, huh...

But then again, perhaps Arcus could count himself as one of them. It wasn't long now until he would be getting a taste of war for himself. While victory was more or less assured, there was one part of the plan that left an odd taste in Arcus's mouth.

Why were they not doing anything to sow discord among Nadar's forces? The only thing close to that had been a note from their commanding officer urging rebellion. They could be doing more to try and disadvantage their opponent, but they weren't.

Nadar's troops were human beings. They might have been organized toward a common goal, but on an individual level, they all acted according to their own interests. While Ceylan's side moved under his influence, Nadar's troops were a collection of conscripted farmers, citizens, and mercenaries. Driving a wedge between those mismatched people should have been easy, and there were several methods to choose from.

They could circulate fake letters to disturb their composure. Leak information that would cause falling-outs between the different groups. Promise glory to those who moved first, baiting troops out to be picked off.

Circulating these kinds of misinformation among the enemy could be done before the prince gathered full muster of his forces. Some of Nadar's men were sure to be ambitious and easily goaded into moving prematurely. Some were bound to dislike each other already. Sending a "secret" letter hinting that one party was near to sedition could easily drive the other party to "punish" them.

The mercenaries would be even easier to deal with. They could just be bought out. Those that valued their reputation might be more difficult to persuade, but the majority of them would be easily swayed where money was involved. Using the kingdom's financial power shouldn't have been out of the question, and it was the fairest and cleanest option too, since it didn't necessitate spilling blood.

Even more assertive would be sending a spy among their ranks to incite dissent. Take it a step further, and the spy could poison the opposing commanding officer, but that idea wasn't realistic, as it would likely damage Ceylan's reputation.

Finally, misrepresenting Ceylan's own forces might also prove useful. Making them out to be less than they were would create real trouble for the enemy when the time came to fight.

"These are just a couple of ideas I came up with just from thinking things through a little."

"Talk about fightin' dirty. Ya possessed by a demon or somethin'?"

"You never fail to impress, Master Arcus. Your sweet face masks something much more sinister. Although I suppose that befits a noble such as yourself. I am sensing just the right levels of depravity from you."

"Your servants don't think particularly highly of you, do they?" Galanger remarked.

"But all that stuff makes it harder to do anything impressive in the fight itself. So I'm glad we're not doing it!" Deet said.

"Oh, right. Yeah, now that you mention it, it would be harder for anyone to make a name for themselves if His Royal Highness implemented these ideas."

"Yup. People'll complain if there are less heads to chop off. People like that count!"

"Yeah, you're right. Especially considering what he was like at the council."

Wars were a huge source of income for martial families. They expected the prince to provide them with those opportunities to earn, and having that taken from them would doubtlessly invite discontent. While any of Arcus's ideas would chip away at the enemy's numbers before the fight, it would also cut down on the number of enemy heads there for the taking. As somebody who had never set foot on the battlefield before, such a detail had escaped Arcus's notice.

Unlike in the man's world, war here wasn't about achieving a desired outcome as a group. It was all about distributing the gains among the individuals involved, and if it was a war where victory was more certain, doing too much to lower those gains was not desirable.

Galanger, who had been deep in thought, suddenly raised his gaze again. "If

all the plans you suggest came to fruition, Nadar's army would in all likelihood collapse from the inside. Unlike ours, his numbers are made up of conscripted soldiers and mercenaries who are apt to flee should the situation become unfavorable. In such a situation, the credit would be given entirely to His Royal Highness."

"No way! That'd be so unfair! Listen, Arcus, please don't tell His Royal Highness any of this stuff!" Deet pleaded.

Deet wanted these achievements to earn the trust of Louise's vassals and the other powerful Rustinell houses. This war was his big chance to do just that, and losing it would be nothing short of a disaster for him. Arcus was quickly coming to realize that there was more to this war than victory or defeat.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. It was one of Ceylan's Imperial guards. After greeting Deet and Galanger, he turned to Arcus.

"Arcus Raytheft. His Royal Highness wishes to see you. Please make your preparations immediately."

"What?"

Before Arcus left, Deet took the time to let him know that, as his "big brother," he would "do great." Currently, Arcus, Noah, and Cazzy were in the carriage that had been prepared for them, and on their way to the castle, where Ceylan was waiting for them. It wasn't even dinnertime; Arcus had no idea what the prince could possibly want from him. He asked the guard, but apparently he didn't know that much himself; he was just ordered to come and get Arcus.

The setting sun glared through the western window of the carriage. Arcus closed the blackout curtain, and the seal on its end came up to meet the seal on the rail, at which point the ceiling light turned itself on. While the carriage's interior was bright again, Arcus's heart felt like it was clad in darkness. He put it down to the uncertainty and anxiety of his sudden summons.

Since his words at the war council seemed to have gone down well, he doubted he was being called for punishment, but he didn't want to rule anything out; he didn't know Ceylan that well, after all. Maybe he was going to

be punished for his lack of preparation before he spoke, or maybe it was because he'd committed some slight against the prince without realizing it. While those reasons shouldn't have warranted this, Arcus tried to prepare himself for the worst as he turned the matter over in his mind.

By the time they made it to Nalvarond Castle, the sun had already set. The prince's sojourn meant that security was tight, and several guards lined the corridors to the meeting room. Arcus and his companions had their belongings searched, and anything that could be used as a weapon was temporarily confiscated.

Noah and Cazzy were to wait in a separate room while Arcus and his accompanying guard made their way to Ceylan's room. Although it was night, the hallway they took there was lit up with a harsh white glow reminiscent of fluorescent fittings. The extra light was likely also for security purposes. Every single guard stationed along the corridor was armed and stood as though every fiber of their being was wound to its tensile limit.

Finally, Arcus and the guard came to Ceylan's room. The guard announced their presence.

"Enter," came the response from inside.

Arcus thanked the guard, not least because he'd tried to answer his earlier query, and stepped inside. The guard didn't follow him, nor were there any further guards inside the room, which Arcus found strange. It was an extravagant room with luxurious fittings, and Ceylan was there alone. The prince was dressed in white, his sleeves long and wide, hiding his hands and arms. Near him sat a sword which reminded Arcus of a jian. On his lap lay an expensive-looking gold brocade blanket. Even in this more relaxed state, his face was completely hidden behind a black veil. There he sat on his four-poster bed, motionless as a doll.

Arcus bowed and knelt in front of Ceylan the moment he was through the door.

"Arcus Raytheft. Here in accordance with Your Royal Highness's summons." Arcus only got more nervous once the words were out of his mouth, and it was all thanks to a sudden increase of oppressive majesty from Ceylan.

It was the same cold force Arcus had felt at the first audience and during the war council. It froze Arcus to his core, as if he was standing outside in the middle of a blizzard; as though the human before him was a dark spirit who had descended from some frost-bound peak. His body stiffened from the imagined cold, and tremors crept through his arms and legs.

Finally, Ceylan opened his mouth.

“Arcus.”

“Sir!”

“Are you afraid of me?”

“There is nobody in this country—no, on this entire continent—who does not fear Your Royal Highness.”

A dry laugh could be heard from the depths of Ceylan’s veil. “I shall allow you to relax a little. There, now your trembling ought to stop.”

“I am grateful for your kindness, sir.”

“Mm.”

The oppressive cold disappeared in an instant, as though it had only been a hallucination the entire time. In the man’s world, people who could switch off the tension exuding from their bodies existed only in manga or novels. Here, they existed normally, and in relative abundance. Arcus couldn’t help but wonder how exactly they controlled that kind of thing. It was as he considered asking Craib about it that Ceylan spoke again.

“You may relax. Hmm... Why not take a seat over there? I shall join you.” Ceylan pointed to a corner of the room.

A polished marble table which shone like a mirror sat there. Comfortable-looking couches with space enough for one were stationed around it.

“But, sir...”

“Fear not. You and I are alone in here. Nobody will punish you for any slights, and none of my men are ill-bred enough to spy on my private dealings.”

“I am surprised that there is not at least one guard present. May I ask why?”

“I wish to speak with you alone. There is no need for any witnesses. Or are you suggesting you might wish to cause me harm?”

“Of course not, sir.”

Even if Arcus wanted to, the prince was so much stronger than him that it would've been impossible. On the off chance Arcus was able to make the first move, he would inevitably lose his head to the sword on the prince's hip within the next second.

Arcus moved to the spot Ceylan had indicated. A tea set had been set up on the table. There was a container full of dried leaves, another filled with hot water, a pot to dispose of the water, a small teapot, some tea cups, and a glass pitcher, among other items. Again, their appearance reminded Arcus of Chinese design, and the items were warm, as if they'd been warmed up in anticipation of his visit.

Ceylan, who had already sat down, casually picked up one of the cups. His movements were light, and he was even laughing a little, as though he wasn't conforming to his usual manners. It was clear to Arcus that he was asking him to make the tea.

“What is this?”

“A phoenix. I ordered that exquisite item from Bǎi Liánbāng.”

Arcus had never heard of it. Instead, he turned his attention back to the tea leaves, trying to guess what kind they were by their soft fragrance. It smelled just like the Chinese tea from the man's world.

“Is this oolong?”

“Impressive. I wasn't aware you had knowledge of eastern teas.”

“O-Oh, no, I just happened to know this one.”

“Is that right?” Ceylan chuckled.

Arcus's guess seemed to please him. The joy in the prince's laugh was genuine. Arcus was surprised that oolong tea existed in this world. Although, since they had black tea, perhaps it wasn't so strange after all.

Arcus looked up at Ceylan, but it didn't look like the prince was willing to

answer any questions; he wanted to see how Arcus would make the tea by himself. Did the man from Arcus's dream know how to prepare oolong? Arcus sifted through his memories while studying the items on the table. The utensils were already warmed, and there were Seals on the teapot keeping its contents hot. There was nothing superfluous on the table, so Arcus deduced that he would have to make use of every tool here.

I think I read that some Chinese teas need to be washed in hot water first...

He managed to pick his memories over for the basics. First, he warmed the pot with hot water, which he then discarded. He then put the leaves in the pot with boiling water, poured that water into the pitcher, and discarded it. After that, he poured clean hot water into the pot and waited for thirty seconds to allow the tea to steep before pouring it into the glass pitcher.

This method was considerably different from the one Noah taught him for brewing black tea. Once all of that was done, he poured the tea into the cups.

"It's ready." Arcus gracefully offered Ceylan a cup.

Ceylan lifted up the edge of his veil to take a sip. "The aroma is most pleasant, but it is passable at best."

"Yes, sir. Please accept my deepest apologies." Arcus lowered his head.

"You ought to work on your tea-brewing skills."

It was a strange preamble to their meeting, but now that it was done, Ceylan moved on to the main topic.

"Arcus. The thoughts you shared at the war council were impressive. It is not an understatement to say they shaped our final policy."

"I am beyond grateful to be praised by Your Royal Highness."

"Mm. That makes this the second time you have saved me. Or perhaps the true number is even higher." Ceylan laughed again. "Now, at the meeting, you mentioned an idea to create several fake copies of me. I would like you to write down the details of that plan and hand it to me later. The details will need refining, but as a general plan, I feel it may be helpful. Whether it works to lure out Nadar or not, I believe there is merit in trying it out."

“Is that so?”

“Yes. It was not a bad idea by any means, and if you had the right status and achievements, I would not hesitate to use it. However, I could not insult the lords who had gathered by adopting your plan when you lack those things. You understand that, yes?”

If Ceylan had chosen to use Arcus’s plan, which stood in opposition to the ideas that had come up in the meeting so far, Arcus would have found even more attention drawn to him. The lords would likely have thought Arcus was the object of the prince’s favoritism, something which Ceylan had chosen to avoid at the meeting.

“It is enough that you have shared your gracious thoughts with me, sir.”

“Mm. It was a surprise to me that you came up with an idea I would even consider passable. I had to turn your plan down, and that was a result of my underestimation of your abilities.” Ceylan tilted his head upwards and let out a sigh mingled with the aroma of tea.

In other words, Ceylan had lost the opportunity to make full use of Arcus’s idea. It wasn’t just Arcus’s idea, but any similar ideas that the lords might have come up with. To Ceylan, the whole thing might have seemed a little like a joke gone wrong. His words were apologetic in tone, leading Arcus to lower his head.

In this world, to have somebody as high as the prince make such an admission to him was a huge deal. It was probably the closest Ceylan could get to an apology, given his position.

“Incidentally, I understand Count Bowe may be troublesome, but I have no intention of removing him. He is of use to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“His outbursts at the council may have been foolish, but he was not the only one present whose intuition falls short. With those types, it is best to explain things simply without being condescending.”

“I cannot help feeling sorry for Count Bowe.”

“It is unavoidable. He is too focused on making a name for himself to think

things through sufficiently. That did make it easier to put an end to the dispute at the meeting, however,” Ceylan said. “I am afraid we are digressing. I would like to commend you for your achievements up to this point. Your sagacity which helped me escape trouble, and your envisioned plan. Most incredible, however, is your aethometer. I have not felt excitement like I did the day one was delivered to me before or since.”

“It is an honor to use what little capability I have to assist this kingdom and Your Royal Highness.”

“There are not many like you in our kingdom.”

“I still have much to learn and experience. I am sure there are many others like me.”

“You need not abase yourself. You have achieved much for one so young. Your subjectship is a matter of great pride to me.”

Ceylan continued in his praise. It pleased Arcus, but there was something else weighing on him.

“What is the matter? You should be proud of yourself. You are a remarkable child; it would take a search of several nations to find another like yourself. Your achievements have proven as much.”

It was embarrassing. Incredibly embarrassing. Being praised was one thing, but Arcus felt he was being praised *too* much. It was almost as though Ceylan was trying to tempt Arcus into getting a big head. It wasn’t unheard of to praise somebody to get them in a good mood and curry favor with them so they were more likely to agree with what you said next. It reminded Arcus of the military commander, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who often employed the same tactic in certain works of fiction. If only Arcus were able to see past Ceylan’s veil, he could get a sense of whether that was happening right now by the prince’s expression.

“I am not quite certain...” Arcus began, but got no further. Those words were enough of a struggle to get out.

Ceylan stood up from his chair and approached Arcus. “Arcus. I have taken a great liking to you. People with your talent are rare, but they are the kind of

people I wish to encourage in their activities.”

“As a servant to the royal family, I am exceedingly grateful.”

“Are you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I wish to support your efforts from here on, and I wish for your great success —” Ceylan moved next to Arcus and placed a hand on his shoulder “—as long as you do not defy me.”

With that addendum, Ceylan leaned down to whisper into Arcus’s ear.
“Become my lapdog, Arcus. My *very faithful* lapdog.”

The sweet words tickled against Arcus’s earlobe, and a gasp caught audibly in his throat. He couldn’t believe the prince thought so highly of him to say such things. “Lapdog” seemed such an extreme way of putting it too, but its meaning was clear: Arcus was to throw away all sense of pride, and run with the sole purpose of being fed by the prince. That was all he had to do for success to follow. Ceylan was set to be the next king: the most powerful man in the kingdom. With his backing, there was no question that Arcus would achieve at least a part of what he set out to do.

Yet his head was full of questions. Did he really want to achieve success at the cost of his self-respect?

“Well? A very attractive offer, don’t you think? Either way, my commands are absolute. All you will have to do is what I say, and everything will proceed just as you wish. You will have it all. I fail to see any disadvantages for you.”

“With all due respect, sir, I do not believe I am fit for such a purpose.”

“But I do. I have recognized your talents, and society will soon follow.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you should agree. Agree to become my lapdog,” Ceylan pressed.

Arcus and Ceylan both lived among the upper classes, and while deals such as these were not uncommon, Arcus couldn’t help but feel there was something strange about all of this. From his impressions of Ceylan so far, he just couldn’t picture the prince trying something like this. Both at the audience and at the

council, the prince had displayed a strict mindset; working to keep things balanced and just. Would someone like that really try to flatter somebody into becoming an ally? Assuming Arcus's initial impressions of Ceylan were correct, the prince was more the type to play by the book.

If Arcus was right, then Ceylan wasn't being genuine. The sweet scent of the prince's breath still lingered in the air when Arcus opened his mouth determinedly.

"Might I say something, sir?"

"What?"

"I am afraid I am unsure what Your Royal Highness is thinking. Please pardon my rudeness, but I would like to hear Your Royal Highness's true thoughts."

Ceylan lowered his tone. "What makes you think these are not my 'true thoughts'?"

"From what I have seen of Your Royal Highness, such a proposal strikes me as out of character. I can only come to the conclusion that this conversation serves some ulterior purpose."

If Arcus was wrong, he was about to face the brunt of Ceylan's wrath—but he didn't see how he could be. Even then, tension stiffened every muscle in his body. He was even more nervous than when he'd stepped into the room, and now a bead of sweat slithered down the nape of his neck.

Ceylan wasn't answering. Though Arcus's mind was still whirring, its movements were stiff and jarring. He waited and waited for Ceylan to speak...only for the prince to start laughing. His laughter seemed to rise in pitch, each note more joyous than the last.

"You are correct! I was testing you!"

Arcus's knees felt weak with relief. He didn't even need to release the breath he was holding for the tension to drain from his body. Ceylan's question had been a probe into his character. That much was a relief, but it was still a cruel thing to do.

Arcus looked at Ceylan, who was letting out a sigh. It was almost as if he was

just as nervous as Arcus. Perhaps he had been worried Arcus would agree.

Ceylan returned to his seat. "I do not like to test people in such a manner, but I am afraid my position demands it. You cannot read the full extent of people's intentions with the naked eye. However, I must admit my relief. You are exactly who I presumed you were."

"I am just glad I was able to meet Your Royal Highness's expectations."

"You are exactly who I presumed you were."

As Arcus suspected, the prince really did think highly of him. It struck him as odd, considering the two of them hadn't spent that much time together.

"I must say, it is quite curious how you seem almost unaffected by my test. Most would be overcome with emotion. As though you grew wearier the more I praised you."

"I beg your pardon for having doubts about Your Royal Highness's character."

"It is best that you have those doubts. Allowing your greed to blind you into believing one you know nothing about is foolish." Ceylan then turned to Arcus with a suggestive hint to his tone.

"Arcus. Do you know who I am?"

Ceylan's question was a strange one.

"Do you know who I am?"

If Arcus was correct, Ceylan was asking who he was to Arcus. The prince's back was still turned as he stopped midway to his chair.

"Yes, sir. Your Royal Highness is the crown prince who shall rule over Lainur's next era."

"Yes..." Ceylan said softly.

Arcus was aware that his answer was as inoffensive and bland as it could have been, but it was the best he could come up with. The apparent reason for Ceylan's question came next.

"It is as you say. I am to inherit Lainur. However, unlike my father or even my grandfather, I was born to bring about a new power."

“A new power?”

“Correct. An impalpable power to force all to fall upon their knees without condition. Where military might, influence, and financial powers do not matter and everything lies within names, lineage, and titles. That is what stirs the hearts of the people. That is what will bring them to trust their leaders. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir. I am afraid I am also one who has a misplaced pride in such things.”

If there was any class which benefited from the way authority was structured now, it was the nobles. While the three forms of power Ceylan spoke of played a part, the common folk’s trust and their general ideas of nobles having status—of their word being absolute and their authority unquestionable—also played a role.

Ceylan already held the position and title of crown prince, so why was he speaking as though this new power was even greater than that? The only person in the kingdom who outranked him should have been the king himself, but this power he spoke of sounded like it either gave him just as much influence as the king, or even more.

“I am afraid I am not quite sure what this ‘new power’ Your Royal Highness speaks of alludes to. I would be most grateful to be enlightened on the matter.”

“Mm. This ‘power,’ or authority, if you like... It is not simple to explain, but...” Ceylan turned around to Arcus. “You may understand this. Arcus, I am *shén zǐ*.”

Arcus looked at the prince and gasped.

“So you do understand. I would expect nothing less.”

Shén zǐ. Ceylan had deliberately used a term from the Elder Tongue. Unlike the man’s world, the common language in this world didn’t have a word for “god.” The very concept of gods didn’t exist in public consciousness, as it was commonly accepted that all creation came about through the Molten Reason. Assuming the Ancient Chronicles were accurate, the sky, earth, mountains, oceans, and everything else were made up of words. The world wasn’t made by somebody deliberately; it first took shape in the uniting and division of words, and as time went on and humans started to thrive, it became what it was now.

The answer was right there in the Chronicles, so nobody even considered that there might be a being that created everything of its own volition like in the man's world. But that didn't mean such a being didn't exist.

There was one who set the Molten Reason into motion: Carner Am Lahai. Described only briefly in *The Spiritual Age*, it was a being worshiped for a short time when *Documenting the Stars* was being written. That was the closest thing to a god in this world. That being was born from the Molten Reason and then went on to control it. It was described as a being with the power to control all phenomena, and when isolated, the word *shén* in the Elder Tongue alluded to Carner Am Lahai—it was the nearest approximation of “god” one could express in any of this world's tongues.

“Does this mean Your Royal Highness has the power to control everything in the world?”

“Correct. I see you remember the being who stirred the Molten Reason,” Ceylan said. “Throughout history, the authority of those rulers who concern themselves only with lineage has gradually declined. Some have even married between different houses over successive generations to strengthen their connections, only to weaken the purity of their royal blood. When one places importance on talent above all else, it ends up making a mockery of their royal rulers, who draw their strength from financial and military powers. I was created to put an end to those people.”

“Is Your Royal Highness saying that your blood contains a power that exceeds His Majesty's?”

“That is correct.” Ceylan nodded.

Ceylan didn't elaborate, so Arcus still wasn't sure what exactly this “power” he spoke of was, but if he was speaking the truth, that blood-borne power would be enough to command the obedience of large swathes of people.

“That is why, in a situation such as this one, I must exceed my father's authority in my actions. I must make steadfast the power my father created for me.”

“So—”

“Yes. That is why I called these troops together without father’s permission, and why I have made and shall continue to make other, similar exceptions.” Ceylan paused to chuckle. “Of course, that is just how he wants it. He is testing me, so that I may rise to a higher station.”

“Is that why there are so few members of the national military present?”

“No, that is because we are cautious of the Hans and Granciel. Their movements suggest they know of Nadar’s endeavors. If they make any *real* moves, our reinforcements will be limited.”

It was a problem of scale. The Hans held huge territory in the Cross Mountain Range, and while the southern nation of Granciel preferred fighting by sea, its land forces weren’t to be underestimated. It wasn’t difficult to see how those two, one a nation and one a tribe with the equivalent power of a nation, could pose more of a threat than Porque Nadar, a mere count. It was strange that they were making moves when the information about the Nadar situation was supposed to be contained.

“My destiny is to rule this kingdom. That is why I must desire great power. I must earn the power to command *anybody*, in order to grant immortality to the Crosellode bloodline,” Ceylan declared passionately.

It was as though he were reaching up to the moon and the sun far off in the sky. He was Don Quixote, who had lost sight of the boundaries between fantasy and reality. Icarus, who was foolishly flying too close to the sun. His convictions were powerful, reaching far beyond what any man should be able to achieve.

While Ceylan may have seemed arrogant, such an attitude was perfectly befitting for a crown prince. It was true that anyone wishing to lead an entire kingdom needed power, and lots of it. Arcus just had one question.

“Why is Your Royal Highness telling me all of this?”

“Arcus. I am in need of reliable allies. Those who do not become drunk on the sweet talk of their superiors, those who are not easily fooled. Those who are able to produce rational thought at all times. Those are the people I wish to surround myself with, and you have not disappointed me.” Ceylan turned again to Arcus. “I want you to lend your power to me, that I might bring my ambitions to fruition.”

This wasn't like any order he had given to Arcus before. This was a request. It was not an imperative; it was a wish for Arcus to *want* to help him. If Arcus were a noble who had a family to support, his answer would have been instantaneous. Most nobles would be sobbing for joy at such consideration from their prince. Their prince, one whose authority was unrivaled, needed *their* help. There was no higher honor in a feudal society.

Arcus was not in that position. He had the man's memories, and what little he knew about how this world's society worked was enough that he couldn't follow authority blindly. That was why, in his heart of hearts, he held doubts. Doubts about accepting the prince's plea without thinking things through.

He couldn't make a snap decision; he had no idea what would happen if he agreed to help Ceylan. Whether it would lead to success or destruction. Or, even more pertinent, whether it was right. He just couldn't figure out what the future would hold if he said yes. He didn't even know what he *wanted* to do. Nothing good could come of mindlessly agreeing if he couldn't even work that much out. And yet Ceylan was the prince. It didn't matter if it wasn't technically an order—he was obliged to do as he was told.

Ceylan's next words saved him.

"You need not give an immediate answer. I am sure you have much on your plate. For the moment, I ask only that you do not forget what I have said."

"Yes, sir." Arcus could do nothing more than nod.

Ceylan suddenly spoke again, as though just remembering something. "I still want you by my side during the fight. My guards shall protect you so long as you are with me. My side is the safest place to be on the battlefield."

"Pardon?"

"Do not act more foolish than you are. Not only will you remain safer, but it will count toward your fighting record when all you need to do is watch. You could not ask for better."

"I understand that; however..."

"I am sure your achievements will equate to more than just the aethometer. When you attempt to reveal them to the world, there will doubtlessly be those

who try to stand in your way. You will likely find yourself stranded. That is not just a problem for you, but for the crown as well.”

Both Arcus and the man had faced people who tried to sabotage them. Ceylan was right to speak of it as a certainty rather than a possibility.

“There are those among the martial houses who care for nothing but one’s achievements on the battlefield. You shall be able to silence them, should you allow this fight to add to your prestige.”

“I am incredibly grateful for Your Royal Highness’s kindness. But won’t there be those paying attention to how I fight during the battle?”

“Hardly.” Ceylan chuckled. “Their attention is firmly fixed on the achievements they themselves stand to gain. If I tell them that you did indeed perform some impressive feats while their backs were turned, they are sure to believe me. That is not to say you should not perform such feats should you so desire. I have heard of your magical proficiency and of the mysterious tool conferred onto you by the Grave Sprite.”

“Oh?”

“Deet informed me when he came to report to me. I heard you sent Gown’s hound after the group that attempted to ambush Louise.”

That made sense. Deet would have needed to give Ceylan every last detail in his report.

Ceylan lowered his head, his veil directing at Arcus’s waist.

“Is that the tool?”

“Yes, sir. This is Gown’s lantern.”

“Mm. I had wondered. I am envious indeed.”

“Sorry?”

“I said nothing. But to meet a creature described within the Chronicles...” Ceylan suddenly clapped his hands together as though an idea had formed in his head. “Yes! I wish to witness it for myself! This location is not ideal; would you allow me to meet Tribe on the training grounds? I should also like to witness your magic.”

Before Arcus knew what was happening, Ceylan had grabbed his arm and was dragging him toward the door. Clearly, he wanted Arcus to do it all right this second. But if they started causing a ruckus on the training grounds this late in the day, it might be mistaken for a surprise attack from the enemy.

“S-Sir! It is already nightfall! I fear we may disturb people by doing this now.”

“I-Is that so? Hmm...” Ceylan seemed genuinely disheartened; Arcus couldn’t see his face, but his shoulders drooped drastically. The next second, he was insisting again. “Just a little cannot possibly hurt. Just a little. If you do not wish to release Tribe, then at least show me some spells.”

Ceylan indicated how much “a little” was with his thumb and forefinger.

“I cannot possibly refuse Your Royal Highness. I am just concerned about how these rambunctious activities might affect our fighting forces as a whole.”

“Hm... Yes, you are correct. I suppose we must give up, although it pains me to do so.” He really did sound disappointed not to be able to see Tribe or Arcus’s magic.

From how Ceylan had acted so far, Arcus thought he was incredibly uptight, but perhaps that aspect didn’t reach to every part of his personality. It was like Arcus had caught a glimpse of the prince’s true age. Even as Ceylan had resigned himself, he mumbled something about “only a little.”

Arcus suddenly remembered something he had been meaning to check with Ceylan.

“Your Royal Highness! I have some vital information to share.”

“What is it?”

“It concerns the assailants we encountered while we were attempting to catch up with Your Royal Highness.”

“The assailants. As I recall, you were able to repel them. Now what is it you must tell me?”

“Their leader was named Eido, sir.”

“Eido...”

“He told us that he holds a grudge against His Majesty, who drove him out from Lainur’s capital twenty years ago. I was wondering whether Your Royal Highness might know anything about that.”

“Indeed I do,” Ceylan answered immediately. Arcus’s eyes widened in surprise at the readiness of his response. “Father often described to me the terrible state the capital was in when he was young. I have heard the name ‘Eido’ several times alongside the names of the magicians Crucible and Stronghold. While the capital had fallen into ruin, this man Eido stood strong with a faithful heart.”

“Is that so?”

“Indeed. I am told the state of the capital was such that one cannot imagine it looking at the city now. Father and his companions labored mightily to restore peace, and Eido never withheld his assistance.”

“Eido said His Majesty betrayed his trust. Could that be true?”

“Do *you* believe it to be true?”

“I believe it to be imprudent to forge a conclusion based on a single side of a story. However, I did not feel that he was lying when he spoke. I had the sense that there was more to his story.”

“I do not know what Eido told you, but it sounds as though he has misapprehended something.”

Ceylan went on to explain the version of events he heard from Shinlu; why Shinlu had no choice but to drive Eido from the capital. There were likely some gaps in the story Ceylan had filled in with intuition, but otherwise it was persuasive and coherent.

“That is shocking,” Arcus said.

“I know father never shared his reasoning with Eido because he felt that was wiser, given Eido’s character.”

If what Ceylan said was true, then there was just one thing to do.

“Sir.”

“Yes, I know. It is necessary to share this story with Eido. I would not like to

see him remain mistaken any longer myself.”

“Perhaps a search should be arranged.”

“No, that is unnecessary. Eido will show himself to me before too long.”

“Does Your Royal Highness mean to say Eido is targeting you?”

“Indeed. Were it not such dreary reasoning, I might suggest he means to put an end to my life personally. However, this is a man who fought with my father when they were younger. More likely, he intends to capture me to lure father out.”

Arcus agreed that Eido wasn’t the type to be satisfied with a simple revenge killing, so Ceylan was probably closer to the mark with his idea, but even that didn’t seem enough to satisfy his desire for revenge. King Shinlu was the most powerful magician in all of Lainur; even if Eido managed to kill him, Eido himself wouldn’t last much longer. If that was what Eido was really after, he must have been absolutely desperate.

“I understand your concerns about Eido, but I should ask you to focus on the upcoming battle for now.”

“Yes, sir! Understood.”

“Mm. I shall expect your steadfast loyalty.”

His conversation with Ceylan over, Arcus left the prince’s room behind.

Once Arcus left, a shadowy figure appeared in that silent room. Its hair was long and peach-colored; its eyes a light shade of violet. It wore silver-framed glasses and the same uniform as the male Imperial guard, despite being a woman.

It was Lisa Lauzei, Chief Officer of the Surveillance Office. She stepped out from behind the furnishings in the room, but Ceylan did not look surprised to see her, as though he had known she was there this entire time.

“I ended up lying to him.” Ceylan sat back in his chair, took a sip from his teacup, and sighed ruefully.

“Please forgive me, sir, for forcing such a lie to leave Your Royal Highness’s

lips.”

“Worry not. It was father who ordered you to stay by my side, was it not?”

“Correct, sir.” Lisa lowered her head.

Ceylan’s guess was correct; Shinlu had ordered Lisa to guard him from the shadows. To her, and indeed to the royal family themselves, an order from the king was more important than one’s own life; even if Ceylan didn’t like it, she had no choice but to follow it.

“He brought up Eido,” Ceylan said.

“We shall search for him. As long as he is after Your Royal Highness’s life, we must find out his location at the very least.”

“I shall leave the matter to you. I suspect it will be no easy feat.”

“I understand.”

“And do not kill him. Father did not, when he had the opportunity.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ceylan tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling for a while. “I must be careful not to let sentiment cloud my judgment.”

“I can well understand how Your Royal Highness feels.” Lisa dipped her head again. “Sir, might I ask about one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Your Royal Highness shared certain important personal information with Arcus Raytheft. He is still a young child. I would not go so far as to call the sharing of secrets with him careless, but perhaps it was...a little rash?”

A thin smile rose to Ceylan’s lips. “A young child, you say? You realize the same description applies to me, do you not?”

“Your Royal Highness will rule over this kingdom’s next generation. He is a mere noble boy, and not even a high-ranking one. It would be discourteous to compare him to you, sir.”

“Lisa. I do not care for your present manner of speaking. Arcus is no ordinary child. You of all people would do well to understand that.”

“Yes, sir.”

Arcus had put Lisa in a tricky spot in the incident with Marquess Gaston. She had been late to the scene and nothing more, but she still felt a little put out by being beaten to the punch. It was then that she tried to tell herself that Arcus wasn't ordinary, but she still found it difficult to wrap her head around.

“Do you still think Arcus is not worthy of the knowledge I shared with him after witnessing our conversation together?”

“That is correct, sir.”

“Hmm...” Ceylan returned his gaze to the marble table as though replaying his conversation with Arcus in his mind. “Arcus was struggling.”

“Struggling, sir?”

“I told Arcus I would like him to lend me his power. He hesitated.”

“He was struggling to come to a decision?”

It was a request from the prince; rude wasn't a strong enough word for the indecision Arcus displayed. Normally Ceylan would not hesitate to strongly condemn such behavior, but he had been lenient this time. It was a noble's duty to accept a royal family member's orders without deliberation, no matter the situation. Any noble child would have had that drilled into them from birth.

Arcus had hesitated in a display of pure arrogance. He had threatened the union between nobility and country, and as far as Lisa was concerned, should be punished for it.

“That is who he is. He would have considered more than what was to happen to him, such as what I was planning.”

“Sir! That is as good as doubting the Crown! The Crown's word is absolute, and as its subject, he should have accepted without question! Allowing oneself unnecessary thought is incredibly arrogant!” Lisa insisted, her voice creeping up in volume.

“Calm down,” Ceylan said quietly. “You are embarrassing yourself.”

“Yes, sir. Please forgive me for my display of passion.” Lisa bowed her head.

“I do not believe Arcus regards the Crown’s authority as absolute. He likely sees us as a more powerful version of the regional monarchs: a lineage that has been granted sovereignty over its territory that it has passed down through its descendants.”

“I fail to comprehend such thinking. If he really holds such contempt for Your Royal Highness, what is there to stop him rebelling like Cau Gaston or Porque Nadar?”

“You mean to say he must have an unshakable faith in the Crown?”

“More than ‘faith.’ All nobility must have absolute loyalty, or they will start to think less of the Crown, and eventually come to resent it.”

“Without regarding the Crown’s authority as absolute, he will be able to entertain superfluous thought, which will lead to a stronger focus on self-interest. He will then make decisions based on the benefit to himself, which will lead him to think less of the Crown. That is your argument, yes?”

“I believe Cau Gaston proved as much.”

“And therefore Arcus will also become rebellious? If that is true, then I must wonder how many traitors we harbor within the kingdom at present. I expect the number to be beyond human imagination.”

“Sir...”

“Lisa. If the Crown’s rule is indeed absolute, and everybody has an unquenchable loyalty toward its rule, then that would contradict my very existence. I should like to ask you something. What is my purpose here? Speak.”

“Your Royal Highness’s purpose is to solidify the Crown’s power further.”

“Precisely. In which case, it is only natural for traitors such as Cau Gaston and Porque Nadar to exist.”

Lisa stayed silent. King Shinlu had created the new power that was Ceylan because he feared that the Crown’s rule was close to fracturing. As time went by, Lainur’s neighbors only grew more threatening, and during the previous king’s reign, the Empire even took over several strongholds and snatched the kingdom’s most precious treasure, the Sword of the Radiant Heavens. Shinlu

already knew the nobility's faith in the Crown was compromised. Denying that meant denying Ceylan's existence itself.

"However, I believe there is still a strong possibility that Arcus Raytheft has not made up his mind," Lisa said. "Deciding to keep him close may be premature when there is still a chance he may turn treasonous. If I may, sir, I believe there would be vital merit in reassessing the situation."

Ceylan dismissed Lisa's concerns at once. "Do you mean to suggest Arcus may betray me? Impossible."

There wasn't a hint of doubt in the prince's tone. It was as if his confidence came from more than simple trust.

"Sir?"

"What? It is impossible. Arcus shall always work for my sake. He shall always be there to assist me. You should know that, yes?"

"Well, yes..."

Lisa *did* know that, but what troubled her was that it was a fact borne of coincidence. That doubt stuck in her throat and remained unspoken. Now wasn't the time.

There were a few moments of silence as Ceylan reflected upon what he knew of Arcus.

"Arcus. You are incredible indeed. You are just who I thought you were," he sighed toward the ceiling, a hint of rapture in his tone.

Rapture and, to Lisa's ears, a subtle melancholy.

Part 2: The Battle of Mildoor

Nadar's forces had been deployed to set up an encampment, and it was there that the second-in-command of the Gillis Empire's southern field army, Dyssea Lubanka, stood. He was currently staring up at the overcast sky. The war council hadn't started yet; he was out here just to get some fresh air into his lungs.

The military command was full of those, such as Leon, who enjoyed a smoke, and Dyssea knew the tent where they'd gathered was inevitably going to end up stinking of tobacco. Dyssea, who neither smoked nor drank, stepped outside and replenished his lungs before every war council, time permitting.

He found clear, blue skies to be most effective, but today was unfortunately cloudy. For a second he almost thought it might be an ill omen, but he dismissed the idea. It was then that he sensed somebody behind him. He turned to see a woman in an officer's uniform saluting him.

She was so still that he nearly mistook her for a gypsum sculpture. Her hair was long and black, with her bangs cut perfectly straight across her forehead. Her skin was fair, a common trait among natives from the north reach of the Empire. Any decorations she wore were modest, and she was completely empty-handed. She wore the Empire's uniform perfectly, complete with a leather bag and small sword on her hip. You would be hard-pressed to find an officer more scrupulously observant of protocol.

She'd graduated from the Empire's military school with outstanding results. A company officer, she had recently returned from a mission within the kingdom.

"We need to be sure to instill a fear of the kingdom into you."

Those were Leon's words when he'd finished his greeting to her here. A high achiever and a stickler for the rules, she was an example of the perfect soldier—even the perfect officer. Her downfalls would include her fussiness on petty matters, and a failure to properly analyze the situation when giving ideas in meetings. Her mannerisms showed she also had a great deal of confidence in herself. To help give her a taste of what a real conflict was like, she was sent

into Lainur. It appeared that she had lost much of her confidence upon her return. Now that she had overcome her trial, she was working as an adjutant.

Dyssea returned her salute, at which point she stood at attention with brisk movements. She brought her heels together firmly, straightened her back and arms, and looked back at Dyssea with a resolute gaze.

“You have family here to see you, sir.”

“Family?”

“Yes, sir. Or so I have been told.”

It was so sudden that Dyssea found it hard to believe.

“Are you sure they are my family?”

“Yes, sir. Their identity has been confirmed. General Grantz has given you permission to see them.”

“The general himself?”

“Yes, sir.”

The general had arranged this meeting? Dyssea had never heard of officers being allowed to see family before or during a military campaign, but he did know that Grantz had a history of keeping his subordinates on long leashes. Some criticized him behind his back for being too soft to be a general, but there was no denying that it made him popular among those he led.

As it turned out, Dyssea’s younger sister had come to see him. She looked somewhat downcast from exhaustion, and her clothes were worn from travel.

“Are you okay?” Dyssea asked anxiously.

“Yes. Thank you.” His sister nodded firmly, but Dyssea knew she wouldn’t have traveled to a place like this all the way from home on a whim.

“What’s wrong? Did something serious happen?”

“Uncle has passed away.”

“Uncle... I see...”

“Yes...”

Dyssea's uncle was the head of their combined families. It had been that way ever since Dyssea's father died in the war against the Empire; his uncle had taken over and brought both families together. The importance of his death to the family could not be understated, and Dyssea understood why his sister had pushed herself to tell him in person. Dyssea allowed himself to reminisce about their uncle until his sister broke the silence.

"Please return to us, brother. You are the only one who can support our family now that uncle is gone. Please..."

She was right. It was Dyssea's bloodline which bore the responsibility to lead the family, and Dyssea himself was next in line. Ordinarily, he would be making preparations to return and step up into his role.

"I am about to go out to war," he said.

"Brother..." Apparently not expecting his response, his sister dropped her gaze to the floor. Her next words came out in a near sob. "I do not wish to force you. I know your position and your family are both important to you. Can you not return and just live a quiet life with us?"

"I cannot."

"Why not?"

"Our family is already part of the Empire. The Empire will absorb our family into itself if I do not show them real results. I must do whatever I can to avoid such a future."

Dyssea's family had surrendered to the Empire in the invasion several years ago, and its territory had been reduced to a single province. As they didn't surrender right away, their position in the Empire was still weak, and they were at risk of being taken over by another family. In order to prevent that, Dyssea needed to rise to a secure rank within the military.

"But at this rate, you will simply be lost to the Emperor's whims..."

Dyssea knew she was right about that too. As far as the Emperor was concerned, the weaker families and clans were disposable pawns.

"You must not speak about His Imperial Majesty in that manner."

“Brother...”

“Please understand that I am doing this for our family too.”

Now that they were part of the Empire, this was the only way left for their family to survive.

“There’s nothing to worry about.” Dyssea tried to keep his tone light to cheer his sister up. “I will not yield; this war is perfectly winnable. I promise.”

“Winnable?”

“That’s right.”

Still frowning, his sister nodded and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, there was a strong light of determination in them.

“If you feel victory is assured, brother, then I beg of you not to forget father’s words. Before victory lies the narrow boundary between life and death.”

Dyssea had always kept his father’s watchwords close to his heart.

“You do not need to remind me.”

“Forgive me for being so forward, brother.”

“No need. I am not upset. I know you are just concerned for my well-being.”

The sibling fell into silence again, at which point the officer from earlier hesitantly approached.

“Please forgive the intrusion, sir, but it is almost time...”

“Understood.” Dyssea turned back to his sister. “Goodbye. I shall return as soon as the war is over.”

“Very well.”

They parted with those few words, and Dyssea allowed the officer to guide him to the tent where the other staff members had already assembled. On their way, he decided to ask the officer the question on his mind.

“What is your name, officer?”

“Rivel Coast, sir.”

“Officer Coast. I would like you to keep my sister’s discourteous comments to

yourself if possible.”

“Yes, sir.”

The two set off for the tent again. When they arrived, Dyssea opened the cover to the entrance, and was immediately struck by a burst of cigarette and cigar smoke. Unable to bear it, he turned his face away and coughed a couple of times. When his breathing had settled, he and Rivel gave a salute.

The big players of the current campaign were already settled inside the tent. There was Leon Grantz, a lean man whose hair was set back with wax, and part of the Empire’s southern field division. Count Porque Nadar of the kingdom, who looked like something between a pig and a flattened toad, and his servant, Byle Ern. A robed woman who wore a white, unsettling mask: Aluas, a magician of the Silver Heralds of the Dawn. In one corner of the tent stood Leon’s attendants and the magicians he supervised directly.

“Please forgive my tardiness.”

“Don’t worry; we’ve only just got here ourselves.”



Dyssea swept his gaze over the other attendants. None of them seemed irritated at his late arrival, and Porque Nadar himself looked relatively relaxed; Dyssea was satisfied Leon was telling the truth. Dyssea took his seat.

"I have a report," Rivel suddenly announced.

"Yes?"

"It concerns Eido's group and the attack."

"Go on."

"The unit comprising our troops and the troops from Count Nadar's army was completely wiped out. It appears they were able to injure Eido, but it is likely that his group has escaped."

Leon hummed thoughtfully.

"We sent the Black Panther Cavalry. You say they have been wiped out?" Dyssea asked in disbelief.

"That only goes to show how powerful that man really is in comparison. Do we have any leads on their trail?" Leon asked.

"Not yet, sir. They seem to have vanished completely into thin air," Rivel said. "What is to be done? They hold information on us. If I may, I believe leaving them alone poses considerable risk."

"They also hold a grudge against Lainur's king. I don't expect they'll be switching sides to join the subjugation at this point, and we can't very well search for them within Lainur. Our only choice is to let them be," Leon said.

Porque's face twisted like he had just been made to swallow something foul. "This isn't quite going to plan..."

"This isn't anything worth worrying about. *Our* plans are still on track."

"They are? Why haven't I heard anything?"

"Because we don't want our war plans leaking," Leon said.

"What plans are these, sir?" Dyssea asked.

"Our efforts to get Granciel and the Hans to make their moves using our

routes. The kingdom won't have any spare soldiers for their little civil war this way."

"Do you mean that?!" Porque asked, his voice laced with enthusiasm.

By putting pressure on the kingdom's eastern and southern borders, it would have no choice but to focus its attention there. Lainur had a historical habit of leaving the first line of defense against invaders in the hands of local nobles. While they held off the enemy, central Lainur would send its elite soldiers from the national forces to the border as reinforcements. By making movements from several sides, those national forces would be forced to split. While Ceylan's men could expect reinforcements, this ensured that there would not be many.

"That should tip matters heavily in our favor," Porque agreed.

"There's one more thing," Leon said. "We leaked false information to the other side. They should realize we're coming at them with fewer soldiers than they have."

"You told them we have fewer soldiers?" Porque said.

"Why did you do that, sir?" Dyssea asked.

The other attendants at the meeting looked just as confused as he did.

Leon looked to Rivel. "Officer Coast. You should be able to answer this one."

"Yes, sir. I believe General Grantz wishes to control the enemy's movements."

"Very good."

"Thank you, sir."

"Control? What does that mean?" Porque asked.

"I'm afraid I'm about to answer your question with one of my own. Imagine you were the enemy, and you heard that our numbers are fewer than yours. What would you do then?"

"Fight in a way that uses our 'superior' numbers to our advantage, of course. Pick somewhere like a large plain, where controlling so many men is easy—as long as we don't hole ourselves up in a castle and it turns into a siege."

“That’s right. So long as we don’t occupy a stronghold, the first decisive battle will be fought on the plains. There’s no need for cheap tricks when you have the numbers advantage, after all.”

“So what then? You leaked that information to them because you want to fight on the plains?”

Leon nodded. “They probably think that they’re the ones picking the battlefield right now. Wanting to make the most of their numbers, they’ll likely be waiting for us on the Mildoor Plains.”

The Mildoor Plains were the obvious choice when Nadar’s side was coming at them so quickly. But there was one more condition tied in to all of this.

“Sir, doesn’t that only work if the enemy has correctly identified our objective? If they don’t realize we are after Ceylan, then they’re more likely to approach us at the Tab stronghold.”

“If they’re not bright enough to realize that much, we’ll be able to cut them off before they make it there and deal with them easily. I don’t think the enemies we’re facing are stupid enough to amble all the way up to the stronghold. Unless we’re dealing with state magicians.”

Silence swept across the tent. State magicians were synonymous with the kingdom’s power itself. Calling them a threat did them a disservice, and their very presence on a battlefield was enough to completely turn the tables.

Porque spoke again. “What advantage do we have, fighting on the Mildoor Plains? Won’t it just be our equal forces pitted against each other?”

“You want us to fight on the plains; trust me.”

“Why?”

“Those plains will be a giant stage, and Ceylan will be right there at the front. You’ll have a clearer shot at him than if we go on the defensive or try to split up their forces, and you’ll have all the power you need to take him down right there with you.”

“Hm... Yes, I see. That is good indeed... Yes.”

Sieges went without saying, but a fight on any smaller of a scale couldn’t

guarantee Ceylan's appearance. Leon was right; any decisive battle would become a stage. As Ceylan's first sortie, there was no way he wouldn't appear for such a crucial battle. His reputation depended on it. And if he did, Nadar's side would be able to launch everything they had at him.

At Leon's reassurances, the color returned to Porque's face, but Dyssea didn't know if Leon had revealed his entire hand to the count. Everything the general had just described worked in Porque's favor, but there was nothing that suggested what the Empire stood to gain. Dyssea couldn't believe that Leon would be satisfied with just that.

He wasn't a man who wasted moves; he planned nothing that did not profit the Empire, one way or another. There had to be a reason the Empire wanted Nadar's side fighting on those plains.

"Officer Coast," Leon began. "Do we have any information on the other side's movements?"

"There are no signs that they have sent an advance guard yet. Our reconnaissance has not reported any movement."

"Any misinformation sown among the ranks?"

"Several letters. We dealt with them before they reached their intended recipients."

"Any generals trying to jump the gun?"

"It appears not."

"What about our mercenaries? Anything suspicious there?"

"Nothing, sir. There is no indication of the other side buying them out either."

"I see. Looks like we stockpiled all that extra money for nothing." Leon let out a disappointed sigh.

It seemed as though the opposing side wasn't doing much at all, which was likely the source of Leon's disappointment. He was a man who liked to pull out all the stops and cheap tricks he could when it came to war. To him, it must have seemed like the kingdom was just being lazy.

But he hasn't done anything to cause trouble for the other side either... Dyssea

suddenly realized.

Leon should have done *something*—that was just who he was. Yet he left that side of things completely to Porque. Fully dividing Ceylan's forces might have been difficult, but a man of Leon's skill should at least have been able to do enough to disrupt and delay them from crossing the border. Then all Porque's side needed to do was move in for the attack. Making the first attack would send the kingdom's faith in Ceylan plummeting, and that alone would be a hard blow to Lainur.

In all truth, the Empire didn't care whether Porque got his hands on the prince's head or not. Its true objective was to drain away some of Lainur's power. If that was the condition for victory, it was well within their grasp, if only Leon did something more to disrupt the enemy. That could mean only one thing: Leon wanted the fight to take place on the Mildoor Plains at all costs.

Dyssea glanced at Leon in an attempt to confirm his suspicions, and the general responded with a brief, confident smile. When the general turned to Porque again, his expression was blank.

"How are things going on your side?" said Leon. "What about your attempts to interfere with the enemy?"

"You should know how difficult it is to make a dent in the Crown's influence."

"I do."

"What about you?"

"Trust me, the Empire has long struggled against the unity between Lainur's Crown and its nobles," Leon remarked calmly.

It was a bold response, and it did nothing to quell the panic in the count's eyes.

"You don't look very well," Leon said.

"Of course I don't! Our situation still lacks certainty of an absolute victory! How can *you* be so calm, General?!"

"Not without reason."

Porque's mouth dropped open as that same fearless smile appeared on

Leon's face.

"You should be pleased. I have called for reinforcements."

"You mean *more* reinforcements?! How?! From where?!"

Leon made a peculiar gesture, and the next second a large shadow appeared within the tent. The shadow let out a hearty laugh.

"I'm guessing he means me!" A giant man stood at the entrance to the tent, slightly hunched over due to his sheer size.

He stood at least two meters tall, and his hair was thick and full, the sideburns leading down into a long beard. Even the fur on his coat gave the impression that he was completely covered in thick, fuzzy hair. His legs and arms were as thick as tree trunks, and his hands were so large he could likely crush two or three human heads at once with his grip. His breaths came heavy through his nose, like a bison. Even Porque, as rotund as he was, looked small in comparison. In spite of his frightening presence, the war council recognized him instantly.

"This man..." Porque breathed.

"Wh-What is he doing here?!" Aluas demanded.

The bull-like man who had entered the tent came from the Empire, and he far outranked even Dyssea. In fact, his rank warranted an immediate order.

"Those ranked adjutant and below are all to salute General Bague Gruba!"

"Yes! Yes, yes! Very good! That's the spirit! That's the spirit you need to fight a war!" The large man nodded as everyone but Leon, Porque, and their attendants saluted him.

Dyssea gave him an extra bow. "Sir."

"Ah! Dyssea Lubanka, was it? Good to see you again!" Bague Gruba was a general from the Gillis Empire's central forces, more specifically its commando unit. His rank was equal to Leon's. He smiled pleasantly. "The last time I saw you was...that time I razed your hometown, yes?"

Bague snorted out a laugh. Dyssea gritted his teeth, but he did not let the bitterness show on his face.

“Actually, I believe it was during the fight at Cassia.”

“Hmrgh? Really? Yes, maybe you’re right. Though it hardly matters!” He let out another roaring guffaw, which made the fabric of the tent tremble.

Dyssea didn’t know how to feel. As Bague said, he and his men had been the ones to trample Dyssea’s birthplace during the Empire’s invasion. Naturally, it was a painful memory.

Dyssea glanced at Porque. The count’s body was stiff as he stared at Bague, presumably out of shock. Porque should have known Bague very well indeed. He was a fearsome fighter who had led several attacks against the kingdom of Lainur. There wasn’t a noble with territory on that border who hadn’t heard his name.

Leon’s lips curled into a satisfied smile as he noted Porque’s reaction. “Our reinforcements are not ten thousand, but a single man. The mightiest soldier of the Empire, in fact. I don’t think you could name me anyone else you’d rather have on your side.”

“Yes... Yes! We can win! We can win for sure!” Porque’s excitement had reached fever pitch in a split second.

The count seemed to have decided that the extra power they had in Bague guaranteed them victory; it was difficult to believe he had been so panicked just minutes earlier. Either way, it seemed things were on track to progress just as Porque hoped. They would advance to the plains to meet the subjugation forces. That was where the count would swoop on Ceylan.

All without realizing that he was playing straight into Leon Grantz’s hands.

It had been several days since the war council. The subjugation force marched off from Nalvarond the moment their preparations were complete. Nadar’s troops did not stop marching east, and they would soon reach Rustinell if not intercepted. If Ceylan’s men did not move quickly, they ran the risk of colliding with the enemy unexpectedly. To avoid that outcome, they were to stick to the plan of meeting Nadar’s side at the Mildoor Plains.

The Mildoor Plains were a huge stretch of flat land in Nadar’s east. If you

followed the highway west from Rustinell and headed through the forests, you would eventually find these plains, covered in short grass. The terrain was so bare and flat that it was as if it had been ready-made for warfare. There was a small hillock further along, but it was barely big enough to deserve the description, and definitely wasn't suitable to set up a defensive position. As such, it was insignificant when it came to fighting. These plains were the best spot a company could hope for to exploit their superior numbers.

"A pleasure to speak with you, Your Royal Highness. The Crown has made false charges against my master, Porque Nadar, without cause. We would like to ask that these soldiers be withdrawn, that my master may be treated with the respect he deserves, and that peaceful negotiation may take place between him and Your Royal Highness."

"'Without cause'? My word is cause enough. Return to Porque and tell him this: I am coming for his head personally." Ceylan rejected Nadar's messenger.

"You shall regret this!" spat the messenger before returning to his master.

Both sides were already gathered. The skies were clear and the wind blew north. Their troops were lined up and facing each other. Having one's soldiers concentrated and managed in one place was a primitive tactic, reminiscent of war during the ancient and medieval times. However, unlike in modern warfare in the man's world, there was still a risk of these soldiers fleeing, and none of them held guns or other artillery, meaning such a formation was the best solution.

While the line formation also provided a powerful method of attack, it stretched so wide that it would be difficult for enemy soldiers to attack from the sides or sneak around the back. It was far better than lumping one's troops into a large mass which could easily be surrounded by the enemy.

The subjugation force's foot soldiers were organized into a line which was flanked on both sides by its cavalry to prevent the opponent's cavalry from approaching those flanks themselves. As was standard, the archers and magicians formed a second supporting line behind them.

Ceylan and his Imperial guards were positioned on the leftmost flank. Rustinell's main forces and magicians were in the center, making up the bulk of

the kingdom's forces.

“My dear soldiers of Lainur! My heroes, who have stepped up in this time of crisis! Allow me to thank you for responding to my call and gathering here today! I shall be fighting alongside you on the battlefield to take down the traitor that is Porque Nadar! That fat, ugly swine has snatched away the happiness that rightfully belongs to Lainur's subjects! We cannot let him get away with it!” Prince Ceylan made his bold declaration from atop his horse.

Despite his age, he carried himself with grace, and his majestic words stirred the hearts of the gathered soldiers like he was a veteran general. His message delivered, he raised his exotic sword high into the air, and the soldiers let out a battle cry ferocious enough to set heads spinning and the ground rumbling. Their voices gathered into a single mass, making Arcus feel as though he were at the epicenter of an earthquake.

And yet, Nadar's men seemed completely unaffected by the tremendous roar. Corrupt as he was, Nadar was not granted a border territory without reason. Though the majority of his men were conscripted, they were not to be underestimated, and Ceylan had more to do now than rouse his soldiers.

Is he really planning to fight at the front?

Under normal circumstances, the commander should be placed at the back of the formation, or remain at the camp—but that rule only applied to the man's world. Here, it was expected that monarchs and lords fill the same role as a general: leading soldiers while also participating in the fight, unless there was some reason why they couldn't. Having them stay behind in the camp was rare.

Ceylan was fighting at the very front, and that was because he had a clearly defined purpose. Putting their prince at the center of their plan might have seemed beyond reckless, but it was a sign of how confident the Imperial guard were in their victory.

As for Nadar's side, while their vanguard was equipped with large shields and lances, their equipment overall seemed lackluster, likely due to their high number of conscripts. The majority of them didn't even have the proper tools to fight, as they weren't formal soldiers. While they had been provided with swords and lances, the most basic of weapons, their defenses consisted of little

more than simple breastplates, and few of them wore helmets. It was a far cry from the men on Ceylan's side, every last of which was properly fitted out. From appearances alone, the subjugation force seemed to hold the advantage. Any fight between those with weapons and armor and those without had an obvious conclusion. Just slaying a handful of Nadar's barrier troops had a chance of imploding his forces.

The *number* of Nadar's forces, however, was unexpected. From the available intelligence, there were supposed to be less, but instead the two forces seemed roughly equal. Misapprehending an enemy's forces could turn the whole battle against the mistaken party. Ceylan's side should have been grateful that their numbers were merely equal; the subjugation force weren't the only ones plotting to trip up the opposition.

Before long, Nadar's men had been roused in the same way Ceylan's had, and the battle began.

It was impossible to tell which side made the first move. Nadar's foot soldiers advanced into the range of Ceylan's magicians, who launched their spells. The next second, the fiery lances of Flamrune filled the air, shooting up in a straight line that made the sky glow orange like the sunset. Everything apart from those lances seemed to turn black under their all-consuming scarlet radiance. It was a splendorous sight, beyond anything one might see in everyday life. The spells from Nadar's side came just moments later.

As Arcus suspected, their spells were also fire-based. Fire magic was the optimal choice on the battlefield, as long as the environment did nothing to lessen its power. Unlike the volley of Ceylan's magicians, Nadar's magicians launched their spells erratically. The difference most likely came down to their lack of aethometer training. Nadar's magicians could not keep pace with Ceylan's, and some of them even failed to incant properly. The aethometer hadn't just helped with the magicians' training, but with splitting them up into groups of similar aether and ability, which had helped to solve the problems plaguing Nadar's troops.

As a flaming red curtain descended onto the battlefield, the front lines raised their seal-engraved shields in unison. The archers took the opportunity to launch a volley of seal-engraved arrows, adding to the dramatic tableau of the

battle's opening scene.

Once the clashing of fire and arrows had subsided, it was time for the foot soldiers and cavalries to advance. The infantry collided with each other while cavalry from both flanks came to blows in an attempt to get around their front lines.

The subjugation forces had more magicians than Nadar, and so they held the advantage in their backlines. Nevertheless, Nadar's side would not fall quickly. There was no doubt about the quality of the other side's command.

"Eulid. I'm leaving the Imperial guard to you."

"Yes, sir," the young man at Ceylan's side responded.

Count Eulid Rain was a young commanding officer who led Ceylan's Imperial guard, and the present head of the House of Rain. He wielded his lance with unparalleled skill and never failed to keep a clear mind. His leadership skills were also impressive; "elite" was the perfect word to describe him. Appearance-wise, he looked very much like any handsome prince you'd find in a girl's manga in the man's world, especially combined with his red cloak—the mark of the Imperial guard—and the white steed he rode. The only thing taking away from the image was the absurdly large spear he held in one hand.

Normally, Roheim Langula would also be at Ceylan's side, but the prince had ordered him away briefly before the battle began.

"Professor. I would like you to command the magical troops."

"But what if Your Royal Highness is targeted by magic?"

"I do not want to take any chances with our command as long as Nadar has as many men as he does. There are plenty of powerful magicians within my Imperial guard."

"Does Your Royal Highness wish for me to 'wreak havoc'?"

"No. Your role is merely to oversee the magical troops. Command them, and make sure their training thus far has not gone to waste."

"Yes, sir."

"You may play a more active role if you deem it necessary, but do not take

too many kills for yourself. Now go.”

Roheim turned to Arcus. “Arcus, Noah, Cazzy. Please take care of His Royal Highness for me.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Understood.”

“Sure thing.”

Once he had their assent, Roheim galloped his horse toward the magical troops, leaving only the three of them and the Imperial guard by Ceylan’s side. Arcus felt a little nervous atop his horse.

“Arcus Raytheft.”

Arcus turned to see that it was Eulid who had called him. His voice was calm and his handsome features clear.

“This is your first fight as well, is it not?”

“Yes, My Lord...”

“His Royal Highness has told me everything. You should feel free to cast spells while fighting alongside the prince, so long as you avoid doing anything careless.”

“Understood, My Lord.” It seemed Eulid had picked up on just how nervous Arcus was, given his gentle tone.

“Make sure you do not die, Arcus. Not in a place like this,” Ceylan said.

“Yes, sir!”

“Good answer.”

Arcus made sure to give the prince a clean, crisp response, despite his nerves. Ceylan sat on his black horse quietly, his face hidden as it ever was by his dark veil. The prince showed none of the panic that pulsed through Arcus’s veins as they stood before the enemy. He looked so calm that Arcus could barely believe it was his first time on the battlefield.

Arcus checked over his horse, sensing it would soon be time to move. It was a war horse lent to him by the Imperial guard. It must have been well-trained, as

it didn't even flinch against the clamor that would spook most horses. He made a note to avoid sharp objects, as horses tended to dislike those, but the risk of rushing into a wall of lances in this fight was low.

"Arcus Raytheft. Have you trained in mounted incantation?"

"Yes, My Lord. My uncle was very insistent on that front."

"Crucible, yes? Then we should have no problems."

Incanting atop a horse ran the risk of a bitten tongue without practice, as Craib had drilled into Arcus during his riding lessons.

It was at that point that Nadar's rightmost cavalry stirred.

"We will move forward as well! As discussed, we shall strike a single blow to the front line of their cavalry before moving southwards! Lure out Porque Nadar, and do not allow His Royal Highness to be injured during the pursuit!"

"Yes, sir," the guards cried before moving out.

The enemy cavalry moved just seconds afterward, coming to meet them. The cavalry and nobody else.

Huh?

There were supposed to be magicians among that cavalry, but there was no indication of any spells coming from the enemy. It didn't make sense that they would be holding back against Ceylan and his supporting fighters either; the obvious thing to do would be to open with spells, or else resort to them as the enemy cavalry moved in order to curb their advance.

It didn't make any sense, but it didn't stop Ceylan from charging ahead. "All units follow me!"

The Imperial guard did just that. Once they had lessened the gap between themselves and the enemy cavalry, Ceylan began to chant a spell from atop his black horse.

"Descending spear. Deathly flash. Dazzling gold. Foolish men grovel upon the earth and dirty themselves with misery, coming upon a golden spear. Judge. Ruin. May that shout descend from the heavens!"



Golden Artglyphs appeared and crackled with lightning, crashing against each other as they gathered around Ceylan's right hand. That lightning flashed brightly enough to sear the retinas of anyone looking and risk permanent neurological damage. The man who appeared to be commanding the enemy cavalry let out something that sounded like a scream.

"Careful! Crosellode's casting a spell! Prepare the anti-magic measures!"

The enemy cavalry's magicians chanted a quick, simple spell to raise a barrier. That was when Ceylan raised his sparkling gold arm.

Light came flashing down from the sky. A thunderous roar rumbled through the eardrums of everyone nearby, and a powerful shock wave burst out over the surroundings. Everything was enveloped in a white light.

Slowly, slowly, that light faded.

It seemed the opponent's makeshift barrier wasn't strong enough to block Ceylan's magic. Among the trails of white smoke that streamed across the ground were the charred remains of the soldiers and their horses caught up in the blast.

"My goodness..."

"Man, I heard the rumors about Crosellode magic, but this is somethin' else..."

Noah and Cazzy stood in terrified awe of the power of Ceylan's spell. This was magic that only the royal family and its descendants could use, and neither of them seemed to understand the nature of the phenomenon it had brought about. They just saw a blinding flash and heard a deafening roar. Which meant...

"Lightning..." A single voice answered the riddle quietly.

There was no doubt about it. The bright flash, the roar and the ensuing shock wave faster than the speed of sound, and the smell of ozone in the air were unmistakable. Being struck by lightning wouldn't normally burn humans, but it was sometimes the case that magic amplified the effects of the phenomena it caused. While the explanation behind the spell was simple, it wasn't difficult to

see why most saw it as a mystery.

It was unlikely that anybody in this world had been able to observe lightning in great detail, and the existence of electricity hadn't been discovered here yet. It wasn't until the 1700s in the man's world that lightning was identified as electricity; this world must still have been unaware of its potential as an energy source.

Ceylan's magic had scattered and panicked the enemy cavalry, but they were quick to get back into position. The loud noise should have spooked the horses, and while Arcus expected their riders to have lost control of the reins, neither of those things had happened. Apparently the enemy had plugged their horses' ears just as the Imperial guard had: a sign that they had properly prepared to fight against Ceylan himself.

Arcus briefly considered launching his own spell after Ceylan, but quickly decided against it. He didn't need to force himself to think too hard about what to do. Unlike Ceylan and his guard, he didn't have the talent to make waves on the battlefield. Making a wrong move would only cause trouble for their side, and he didn't want to risk running out of aether this soon either. Besides, he doubted Ceylan would like it if he got so eager as to act recklessly.

Arcus decided to take Eulid's advice and focus on acting as support; to roam and defeat any soldiers who tried to approach with magic, and use protective spells to defend Ceylan and his guard against any spells and projectiles, making it easier for them to fight. That should be enough to fulfill his role here.

"Master Arcus."

"You should do what you feel is best, Noah. That'll make things easier on you, right?"

"In other words, you do not expect me to take things easy."

"Yeah, well, you don't look like you wanna."

"Very well. I shall do my utmost."

Noah had fought on the battlefield before when he worked under Craib, so Arcus didn't doubt he would fight well if left to do his own thing—better, even, than if he were subject to Arcus's orders.

“Take care of our master, Cazzy.”

“Easier said than done, but sure,” Cazzy replied with a cackle.

Noah passed Arcus’s reins over to Cazzy and went off to fight where he would be more useful.

“What about me, then?” Cazzy asked.

“You can help support the Imperial guard with me. That’ll suit you better than fighting alone, right?”

“Yeah. I’ll do that, then.”

Cazzy tended to favor defensive and support spells over offensive ones, so he would be better placed staying with Arcus and defending the Imperial guard than striking out alone like Noah.

His servants set in motion, Arcus followed Ceylan’s instructions to run parallel with him. They created a distance between themselves and the enemy cavalry, at which point they stopped and Ceylan ordered the Imperial guard to go and close the gap.

The vanguards collided, exchanging blows with their spears. Friend and foe seemed to blend into one, and although the fight hadn’t quite descended into a free-for-all, it was impossible to cast any spells in their direction.

But I can target my spells somewhere else...

Arcus made his move then. His role was a supportive one; all he needed to do was *assist* Ceylan and his guard in their fight. He moved his horse out stealthily to flank the guard and opposing cavalry. When part of the enemy noticed, he found himself face-to-face with several cavalymen. He would let Cazzy deal with them.

“Jet-black wings glitter in the night. Your allies are black iron, as are your enemies. The flapping of those wings causes no sound, scattering iron sand up high, high into the sky. Tired of eating leaves, unsatisfied by cherries. Lend me metal tools. Feed me iron. You call for iron, a butterfly sustained by metal tools.”

Artglyphs sparked into life as Arcus chanted. They turned black one by one before starting to swirl around each other like a vortex. They looked like

particles of iron sand forming a visible magnetic line. They formed tiny black coils around Arcus's outstretched hand before drifting into the air.

"He's using magic!" one of the cavalrymen called.

"Tch! Get back!" warned another.

"Magnetic Butterfly."

The swarm of butterfly-like coils took off in the direction Arcus's arm was pointing: the sky behind the enemy cavalrymen. They twisted together there and became one, creating a jet-black force field against the vivid blue sky, so dark it looked a hole had been torn open in that space. At that moment, the magnetic line at the center of the black vortices shifted into the shape of a huge butterfly flapping its wings.

"I-It's not an offensive spell? So is it a supporting one?"

"A black butterfly? Or is that a tornado?"

The cavalrymen underneath the magnetic butterfly stared up at it in confusion, likely wondering why it wasn't attacking them directly. Since it wasn't harming them, there was nothing to dodge, and without understanding the spell, the magicians could do nothing to counter it. Some of them began to chant defensive spells anyway, but before they could finish, their weapons and armor started to clatter in time with the beating of the butterfly's wings.

"What's going on?" The cavalrymen looked down at themselves in confusion.

The next second, their reactions turned extreme.

"M-My body! It's being pull—Aaaaaah!"

"My weapons! My weapons!"

"What is this, dammit?!"

Cries of panic rose intermittently from the cavalry's rear guard. Iron sand floated through the air around the Magnetic Butterfly like scales from its wings. Iron-forged weapons and armor were sucked in toward it. Swords and spears flew at it in parallel. Gauntlets slipped from soldiers' arms. Those directly underneath the field were pulled up into the air by their armor. The enemy cavalry lost both their weapons and their balance, falling from their horses. The

soldiers at the rear fell like dominoes, their formation shattered. Arcus saw his chance and prepared his next spell.

“A greedy man longs to possess as much as he can without discretion. He is hungry even for the specks of dust on the ground. Take this unprejudiced right arm and receive all that it holds.”

“Scrapped Arms!”

Scrapped Arms had been conceived as a spell for gathering discarded refuse. Would it work on the swords, helmets, and gauntlets dropped by the enemy soldiers? Did they count as trash simply because they were dropped?

The answer came almost at once, as the lost gear flew to Arcus’s right arm with incredible force. They slammed into the cavalymen in their path, and while they didn’t hit all of them, Arcus now had his weapon ready to fire.

While the obstructing cavalymen fell, the rest of them, and indeed the Imperial guard themselves, gaped at the huge mass of metal collected around Arcus’s right arm.

“Cazzy!” Arcus called out a warning.

“Guargh! That there is terrifyin’!” Cazzy quickly turned his horse around and pulled it clear of Arcus’s line of fire.

Arcus responded by leveling the most sinister arm his spell had ever created at the cavalymen who stood in his way with a roar.

Their remaining weapons stood no chance against the gigantic arm. One cavalryman was swept sideways along with his horse, while another caught the full brunt of the arm’s fist, letting out a scream as it crushed him into the ground. The iron mass included several blades; what happened to the men who received a direct blow did not bear describing. It was then that Arcus ordered the arm to “fly,” and it did so in a curious direction.

Cazzy frowned. “Ya coulda aimed that at the bad guys, y’know.”

“I didn’t wanna hit the Imperial guard. Letting it fall apart here would get in the way of their horses too.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

Arcus returned back to his original position, where the Imperial guard, who had been protecting Ceylan, praised him.

Eulid was one of them. “Arcus Raytheft. That was impressive.”

“Thank you, My Lord.”

“Arcus,” Ceylan called.

“Sir!”

Arcus was expecting to be praised by him too, but instead Ceylan pointed up to the sky above the enemy cavalry. For a split second, he was worried he might have made a mistake.

“Arcus! Arcus, what was that spell? Why did all those weapons fly toward that big black vortex?!”

“Huh?”

“It was only weapons. Weapons, armor, and the soldiers wearing them that flew toward that thing. Why were the horses not included, for example?”

“Um, because... Uh...”

“Wait. Do not tell me yet. They were all metal. So it must have something to do with magnetism. Am I right? I am, am I not?”

Arcus didn’t know how to respond, but he didn’t need to see the prince’s face to know there was an excited sparkle in his eye.

“Your Royal Highness,” Eulid began, stepping in, “I do not believe this is the suitable time for such a discussion.”

“Hmph, you are correct. Very well—the enemy has broken formation! Trample down the vanguard at once!” Ceylan raised his sword, signaling for the Imperial guard to move as one.

The enemy cavalry was in chaos, with some soldiers unhorsed and others completely unarmed. There was no way for the Imperial guard to lose this skirmish. Arcus stood beside Ceylan and watched as they destroyed the cavalry with ease.

He realized then how important it was not to push himself in this battle. All he

needed to do was cause some moderate disruption and then allow Ceylan and his men to do the real fighting. That seemed to be the best strategy.

Ceylan and the Imperial guard, who had been positioned on their own forces' left flank, managed to nearly wipe out Nadar's right-flanking cavalry, and it was all thanks to Arcus's Magnetic Butterfly, whose disruption had spread from the enemy cavalry's rear right to the front.

Half the cavalry had been slain, while the rest had fled. Whether they would flee the battle altogether or rejoin other parts of the fight wasn't clear, but breaking up one of Nadar's cavalries was a huge victory for the Imperial guard. They wouldn't be able to reform, and so the guard turned to the left, heading toward the southern Mildoor Plains as planned.

By breaking ranks, they were acting independently of the rest of the army. Ordinarily, that would mean isolation, which was dangerous—but not this time. This time, it was a vital part of their strategy.

“After him! Kill Ceylan, even if it kills you!”

The guard found themselves pursued by a unit of foot soldiers; Porque Nadar stood shouting commands in their midst. His body betrayed his preference for indulgence of his ego over self-preservation. He looked all at once like a pig, a toad, and a political caricature.

Nadar was the second obviously corrupt noble Arcus had laid eyes on, but he looked even more rotten than even Marquess Gaston had. Since he was wearing armor, he must have been ready to put up a fight, to some extent. Arcus could well imagine the trouble the craftsman must have had putting together armor for a man of his proportions.

Nadar rode a biggish horse and was surrounded by cavalymen to protect him as he gave the order for his foot soldiers to attack the Imperial guard and his target. The soldiers gave chase, along with the foot soldiers on the right flank of the enemy's original formation, apparently unaware that this was exactly what Ceylan wanted.

The Imperial guard split itself into two to deal with the pursuers. Half of them met them to fight, while the other half continued south. The distance between

the two groups mounted as the enemy pressed their attack.

“Porque Nadar! You are a filthy swine!” Ceylan shouted. “Slay me with your own sword, if you have the courage! If you can drag that carcass of yours near me, that is!” Ceylan let out a laugh.

“Why, you uppity brat! Graaaaaaargh!”

“You are even less attractive when enraged, it seems! ‘Swine’ is indeed an apt description, but perhaps ‘squashed toad’ is just as apt.” Ceylan continued to provoke Nadar.

What really impressed Arcus was the skillful way the prince’s Imperial guard continued to move for his protection, forming a sturdy perimeter as they withdrew, barely suffering a scratch. It really was a sight to behold.

“What are you doing?! Get Ceylan! I don’t care if they are on horseback! You outnumber them!”

“His guard isn’t letting us get close!”

“Then bring in more foot soldiers from the flank! I don’t care how skilled they are! They won’t be able to do anything if they are outmanned!”

“B-But our line of battle—”

“Forget the line of battle! As long as their men are stronger, they’ll break our formation eventually in any case! Slaying Ceylan is our only means of victory! Go after him with every soldier we can spare!”

“Yes, My Lord!” Nadar’s attendant replied.

Nadar turned to a nearby foot soldier. “You there!”

“Y-Yes, Milord?!”

“Come here!”

The soldier did as he was told, at which point Nadar unsheathed his sword.

“Huh?”

The sword glinted through the air before the soldier had time to say anything else. The next second, there was a squeal as the wound in the soldier’s chest opened and he collapsed to the ground, thereafter motionless.

“Let that be a lesson to the rest of you! I am not prepared to sit here and listen to you whine about the enemy’s strength! Their strength matters not; fight back! You are to throw away your lives if you must! Disobey, and you will end up just like this man here!”

Cruel as they were, his actions had an immediate effect. Letting out panicked cries, they rushed the Imperial guard like sheep fleeing wolves. They had only two choices, and both led to death.

More foot soldiers ran forward from behind Nadar’s unit, as though his earlier orders had finally come into effect. More units, if not the entirety of Nadar’s army, were walking right into a mire of Ceylan’s own making.

“Group one, fall back. Group two, cover them.” Eulid gave his orders quietly.

The Imperial guard was slow to respond due to the overwhelming number of infantry, creating a gap in their formation. That gap did not escape Nadar’s notice, and his next order was for the cavalrymen surrounding him.

“There! Charge!” he cried.

Three of the cavalrymen rushed forward, heading straight for Ceylan. The allies they trampled underfoot were ignored, as were the Imperial guard they slipped past.

“Ceylan Crosellode! Prepare yourself!” The cavalrymen let out an impassioned war cry.

I gotta do something!

Arcus readied himself to launch a spell.

“Fear not.”

“Sir?”

“Just keep quiet and watch.”

Arcus closed his mouth. It was then that Eulid turned his white horse and smoothly positioned himself in the three charging cavalrymen’s way. He deflected their lances swiftly, dealing with each of the riders one by one. They were slain within seconds by his skillful defense.

“How strange, Porque Nadar!” Eulid’s voice rang out across the battlefield. “Is this all your cavalymen are capable of? If so, I fear your leadership is lacking!”

What had started as an oversight on the Imperial guard’s part ended up working in their favor. Seeing the fully-equipped cavalymen fall so easily would have been incredibly damaging to the foot soldiers’ morale.

Porque Nadar let out an enraged cry at Eulid’s goading. His exact words were muffled by anger, but that they were unkind was obvious.

“Eulid,” Ceylan said.

“Please continue to provoke him, sir. I shall continue to lead the guard.”

“Very well.”

Eulid gave another order to fall back, and Arcus and Cazzy did so as well. While following the guard as they retreated might have sounded like a simple task, it was anything but. They had to be constantly on guard against their surroundings, with no time to relax.

The guard fought back the front line of the infantry which pursued them, but the enemy’s numbers were increasing despite their efforts. They were faced with an even more overwhelming force than Arcus could imagine, since Nadar wanted Ceylan’s head so much he’d ordered his men to break formation. The air was filled with stamping, clashing, and rumbling as soldiers ran and metal collided.

“...ey...”

It was all Arcus could hear. It reverberated in his head, constant and unyielding.

“...hey...”

Screams blended into roars which blended into crashes, chasing the group onward as they retreated south, and there wasn’t an end in sight.

“Hey! Ya listenin’?! *Hey!*”

Cazzy shook Arcus’s shoulder then, snapping him back to reality.

“Huh? Oh, um, yeah, I’m listening. What’s wrong?”

“Ya doin’ okay? I’ve been callin’ ya forever, but ya weren’t sayin’ a thing. What’s wrong?”

“Um, well...”

Arcus knew he had been distracted. No, it was more than that; he hadn’t heard Cazzy at all. At some point among the clamor of the battle, the voices around him had been drowned out.

“This is kinda overwhelming. I feel like I’m gonna go insane,” Arcus said, sharing with Cazzy exactly what was on his mind.

While tensions were at a minimum in these early stages, the cries and screams had been wearing Arcus down mentally, and he hadn’t even realized it. In some ways, he would have found it preferable to be doing some fighting himself. The group’s constant retreat was tough on his resolve.

“I get that. I mean, it’s your first fight and all.”

“You seem fine, Cazzy.”

“We got mobilized once in a while back in the Institute. Nothin’ as big as this, but experience is experience. I got used to it. Not much, but enough.” Cazzy shrugged.

His tone was as light and casual as ever, and it comforted Arcus to know that his companions weren’t feeling as stressed as he was. But even then, the moment Arcus started letting go of the tension inside him, it started being replaced by an urge to flee, as though the soldiers crowding in on them were a huge inferno or tidal wave. He was starting to realize why soldiers sometimes fled the battlefield; he never realized just how terrifying huge swathes of men could be.

“Arcus Raytheft!” Eulid called.

“My Lord!”

“If your heart is wavering, join your voice with that of our guard. Fear fades when you make yourself part of a group. This is the battlefield, and you must do everything you can in order to survive. If that means deluding yourself, so be it.”

“Y-Yes, My Lord...”

Arcus did as he was told, joining in with the occasional battle cries of the Imperial guard. When he did, he found the sense of unity caused a new confidence to well up inside him.

“Arcus Raytheft,” Eulid spoke again. “You must not allow your high spirits to carry you away. Should you yield, you will find yourself in the dangerous hands of arrogance. Delude yourself if you must, but stay prudent.”

“Understood, My Lord.”

With Eulid stepping in at every moment, Arcus felt as though he were a student being instructed by his teacher. It had reassured him, and he was grateful for it, but he couldn't help worrying that Eulid had more important things to be focusing on. Turning his attention back to the guard, Arcus noticed the orders were now being given by one who looked to be second in command. Again they were ordered to keep falling back, which was when Cazzy fell in line with Arcus.

“Feel a little better?”

“Better than before.”

“Ya can hide behind me if you're scared, y'know.”

“I will, if it gets too much.”

It was at that moment that a sheet of ice suddenly spread out over the ground beside Nadar's unit.

“Workin' hard, ain't he?”

Arcus couldn't see very well, but it seemed that Noah was assisting them. The ice sheet looked like a means to prevent the enemy soldiers from taking the long way around for a surprise attack. It was then that the enemy soldiers at the front knocked their arrows. While it sounded like Nadar had only called his foot soldiers from the flanks before, it seemed some of the archers from the back of the original formation had also joined them.

“Ugh, we can't just stare at 'em, can we?”

“Yeah, I think it's time to use some magic.”

The Imperial guards around them were preparing to deflect the arrows. Arcus made to use a defensive spell, but Cazzy stopped him.

“Wait, wait, don’t get hasty. I’ll do it.”

“Uh, okay, sure...”

“Leave the arrows to me!” Cazzy called toward the surrounding soldiers before incanting.

“Algol’s capable cloth. Envelop the firewood, kindling, spearheads, and arrowheads. No pointed or sharp objects can open a hole. Once unfurled, it can wrap up anything at once.”

From the incantation, it sounded like a variant of Algol’s Suffocating Cloth, a spell Cazzy used at the Holy Tower.

Cazzy pulled a cloth from his breast. Artglyphs coiled themselves around it, and it grew bigger. It was now large enough that it reached the ground, and it looked heavier too, as though its thickness had also increased. But Cazzy showed no difficulty in waving the wide cloth toward the flying arrows, where it met several of them in the air.

It was an easy victory for Cazzy’s capable cloth. Some of the Imperial guards murmured in astonishment, while Cazzy himself let out a whistle. Again, Arcus was glad to have such a reliable man by his side.

“Your spells are always super clever.”

“Magic’s all about versatility.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m just thinking you can do all this stuff, and you wasted your time kidnapping kids.”

“Ya don’t gotta keep bringin’ up the past, y’know!” Cazzy shook his head. “But don’t ya go usin’ too many spells, y’hear? Yer gonna tire yourself out if ya go crazy now.”

“Does it matter if I tire myself out?”

“Quit bein’ dumb. We can’t use all them amazin’ spells like ya can. We gotta keep your magic in reserve. Just lemme do all the castin’ for the both of us for the moment, yeah?”

“Got it. I’ll be counting on you.”

Cazzy broke into a snaggletoothed grin and let out his usual cackle.

For almost the entire fight so far, Arcus had been relying solely on others. He still wanted to do something, but all he could do was sit tight for the time being.

“Magicians! Send forth the magical troops! Use that defending magic and open a path to Ceylan!”

Nadar’s reckless cry sounded from in front of them, and the next second there were magicians standing before the Imperial guard, likely the same ones who had held back when the cavalries clashed. They broke through the line of foot soldiers swiftly before gathering together into their ranks. They moved more quickly than the magicians who had cast those spells at the battle’s opening. So quickly, in fact, that they seemed to rival those of the kingdom’s own magicians. The Imperial guard rushed in to scatter them and prevent them from launching any long-range magical attacks, at which point the enemy magicians cast a defensive spell.

Gray Artglyphs appeared and rearranged themselves into a collection of regular hexagons. Those hexagons came together to form a seamless barrier in front of the magicians, their edges fading to create one large shape. The gray wall was semi-transparent, reminding Arcus of the kind of defensive shields seen in science fiction.

“It’s a honeycomb structure...”

Arcus was surprised to see the hexagonal tessellation that he associated with tank armor in the man’s world. If it was being used in a defensive barrier like this, he would wager that it was both tough and required little aether to construct. Yet they had created something like that with so many magicians; from the amount of aether used, Arcus would guess it held enormous defensive power.

The Imperial guard’s attacks reached the barrier then, their lances and arrows crashing into it.

“What?!”

“My lance won’t pass through!”

Their weapons simply bounced off as though the barrier were made of stone. The guards attacked again, but they couldn't even leave a mark on the shield.

Eulid gave his next command.

"Fall back! Magicians, cover them!"

The magicians immediately followed his instructions.

"Turn my will to flame. May this single spear set the sky alight and burn through all who stand in my way."

Fiery lances flew through the air toward the enemy's barrier. They hit their mark, but still failed to leave a single scratch on it, let alone reach the soldiers shielding behind it. Even Flamrune wasn't enough to overcome the barrier.

"I was not aware Porque Nadar possessed such powerful magicians." Ceylan sounded dubious.

"It seems incredibly unlikely," Eulid agreed. "They are rather skilled to be working under his command. *Too* skilled, in fact."

"Then where did they come from?"

"I doubt they are mercenaries. Perhaps Arcus Raytheft was right, and the Empire is playing a role in all of this."

"The Empire. That is all we need," Ceylan spat, before readying the aether within him. "If my guard cannot penetrate that barrier, I shall—"

"Please, Your Royal Highness, do not."

"Why not?"

"The chance that that shield can block Your Royal Highness's magic is slim indeed; however, if it should, it will not bode well for what comes next. Especially if we are dealing with the Empire. This might be exactly what they want."

Ceylan looked peevish, but Eulid was right. Crosellode magic was representative of Lainur's power. If it was successfully blocked, it might bear out poorly on the royal family's authority.

At the same time, something needed to be done. The distance between the

Imperial guard and the enemy soldiers was both too little and too great to attack effectively. If they retreated any further, they would find themselves vulnerable to magic from behind. The magicians among the Imperial guard would no doubt do what they could to defend, but they were fewer than the magicians under Nadar's command. Depending on the spells that came at them, they could be looking at some serious damage.

The cavalry protecting Nadar were moving again. No doubt they would be coming to put pressure on the front lines of the Imperial guard to make full use of the barrier. There was no more time to waste.

"Your Royal Highness. May I make an attempt?"

"Arcus. Do you have a spell that can penetrate their defenses?"

"I believe I might, sir."

"What?! Why haven't I heard of this?!"

"Pardon?"

"Oh, um... Nothing. How confident are you?"

"I think it should work, as long as that shield is weaker than the armor used on tanks."

"Tanks do not use armor; they are for storage..."

"Oh, um, I didn't mean those sorts of tanks..." Arcus said quickly.

Of course the first "tank" that would come to mind in this world would be storage tanks for water or other liquids. It was only now that Arcus remembered the other kind didn't exist here.

"Let us save the talking for later. I need some cavalry to cover Arcus!"

A few members of the Imperial guard followed Ceylan's instructions and surrounded Arcus. Arcus glanced at Cazzy, who nodded his approval. While Arcus shouldn't be wasting his magic, their unit was out of options.

"What're ya plannin', then?"

"No normal spell's gonna get through that barrier. But I've got just the thing."

"And what's that?"

“Remember that spell I used in my uncle’s mountain range?”

It was clear from the strained expression on Cazzy’s face that he remembered very well.

“Stay back if you don’t wanna get blasted full of holes.”

“Holes’d be the least of my problems if I took *that* full-blast.”

Arcus stepped to the front of the formation with Cazzy and the soldiers assigned to guard him. At his appearance, the enemy cavalry split into two groups, coming at him from ten and two o’clock. Arcus positioned his horse before having it face them side-on.

“Never-ending, penetrating, torrent of evil. The dark blinking of soapberry and its crimson tide after the downpour. It runs and turns according to nature’s will. Heat never cool, and know not your target. Pierce the soldiers’ ears and drown out their battle cries. Run an incessant rampage.”

Arcus stuck his right arm through the magic circle that appeared in the air, at which point it began to spin rapidly. The construct resembled a Gatling gun, a weapon which changed the face of war in the man’s world. The Artglyphs seemed to roar as they spun, announcing that this spell was here to leave its mark on the battlefield, formerly dominated by fire-based magic. The spell’s name was Spinning Barrel.

Its first target was the mounted force rushing toward him. “Good luck dodging this...”

With that short taunt, Arcus followed up with the trigger word.

“Volley.”

The Empire’s supporting troops, led by Leon Grantz, positioned themselves around the hillock on the west side of the Mildoor Plains. The plan dictated that they weren’t to join the front lines just yet. Said plan came from the Empire’s generals, not Nadar himself. They had told Nadar before the fight that they were to remain behind so as not to steal his thunder—in bad faith, naturally. Right now, they were waiting for their chance to move out.

This hillock was low, and while it wasn't possible to see the entire battlefield, they could get a good grasp of the current situation. The first step had been to send the magical troops, equipped with a new defensive spell, along with Nadar and wait for them to report back. In the meantime, the Empire's troops stood atop the hillock and watched each army's central formation.

It was Lainur's own magical troops Leon was most interested in. The news that Lainur's magicians had undergone a meteoric rise in skill was the reason Leon had made contact with Nadar in the first place; he wanted to know the extent of their new power.

"Sir?" Dyssea shot Leon a questioning glance.

"Their magicians' attacks are swifter than before, just as we thought," Leon replied.

Magical troops were invariably sluggish, but Leon could see none of that in the kingdom's magicians now. It wasn't just their movements; magicians needed to start preparing their attacks at the same time to make sure they had sufficient power focused to launch those spells. Their timing had to be totally in sync, and that in itself could take a while.

They needed to attune their aether to the chosen spell and time the incantation so that it launched at the right moment. Those two factors made magical troops waste more time than other branches of the army; yet the kingdom's magicians moved quickly and in perfect time with each other, showing none of the common weaknesses of such a unit. That much had been made clear before the infantries had clashed and the first spells of the battle were cast.

The kingdom's forces began their incantations at the same time as Nadar's, but their spells launched just a fraction quicker, and they only rarely seemed to run into the usual stumbling blocks that would make a spell fizzle out, such as imperfect incantation. Leon understood there might have been a difference between a country's central forces and a lord's private army, but the magicians on both sides hailed from the same kingdom. If there *was* a difference, it should not have been insurmountable. So why was that exactly what he was witnessing?

“There’s no doubt that there’s *something* behind this sudden power increase.”

“Is that right, sir?”

“Definitely. Which means we’re lucky to be a part of this. Learning that there’s a difference in strength between two different armies of the same nation is an incredibly useful piece of information.”

“That means we’ll have to keep looking into this, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. Officer Rivel, how are those records coming along?”

“They are in as much detail as you have ordered, sir.”

Leon turned to look in a different direction. “Then all we have to do is wait for the magicians to report back to us. Aluas, can we count on you?”

“Of course. The doctor said this spell was a most fantastic piece of work, so I am sure it will be up to your standards, sir.”

They were talking about the new defensive spell. If it had the approval of Megas’s best pupil and a disciple of the Silver Heralds of the Dawn, then it had to be as powerful as Aluas said.

“Do you think Nadar will be able to take Ceylan’s head, sir?” Dyssea asked, his eyes fixed on the battlefield.

“I doubt it. He’s so obsessed with it that he’s got all of his soldiers focusing on Ceylan. I’m sure Ceylan himself has worked out what he’s after. He’s being careful to protect himself and using that to lead Nadar’s soldiers on. So long as he dangles himself within Nadar’s reach like a juicy carrot, the swine will follow where he pleases.” Leon’s lip curled.

Nadar was focused on Ceylan at the cost of everything else. Leon motioned with his staff toward a section of the battlefield for Dyssea, who didn’t immediately seem to understand what he was talking about. The section he pointed out stretched from the center of the line of battle to the right flank, where Nadar’s infantry was holding back the subjugation force’s front line of foot soldiers.

“See there?”

“Sir!”

“The count must slay the prince. To do that, his only choice is to chase Ceylan down. But he also needs a good number of men with him, meaning there are only so many left to hold the front lines. And yet, they mustn’t let that line be taken, or allow any enemy soldiers to break through it. That’s why Nadar’s men are spreading further and further along the field.”

If any of Ceylan’s soldiers could break Nadar’s front line, it would crumble and split. And if any gaps opened up, enemy soldiers could surge through, leaving Nadar himself vulnerable to a pincer attack. That was why the foot soldiers holding the front line were forced to extend out to the right flank to prevent any gaps and protect Nadar as he chased Ceylan southwards. Whether that was Nadar’s intention or not didn’t matter.

“If he had enough soldiers to hold that line, they would have been fine to hold the enemy back, but Nadar really had to scrape the bottom of the barrel to gather these men. Their equipment is lacking, and so are their numbers. They have no chance. Look at the center of the line there; they’re inches from being torn apart.”

In the process of trying to gather around the right flank and stretch out the front line, the entire line’s composition had become much thinner. The perilous state of the situation was obvious with a single glance from a bird’s-eye view.

“The numbers were supposed to be relatively even on both sides,” Dyssea remarked.

“They were at the start of the conflict, but the thing about armies is that they tend to only get smaller once the exchange of blows begins. That’s why the other side had more troops waiting at the back to fill in. Rustinell troops, in fact.”

Since Nadar’s line was spreading out, the opponent’s had no choice but to do the same. However, their line remained just as thick as before, the central spaces filled with Rustinell soldiers famed for their strength and magical troops sent as reinforcements from central Lainur. At this rate, it wouldn’t be long before the enemy ripped open a hole in Nadar’s line. Once it was thin enough, the only thing left to do would be to separate the soldiers to open a gap.

“Unless the enemy disrupts their tactics, they’re bound to win. Yes, we matched their numbers, but their soldiers’ skills and equipment are on a different level. But to think...”

It was Ceylan’s resourcefulness which had led to his certain victory, and that was terrifying to think of. Not only had he correctly identified his opponent’s objective, but he was now using himself as bait to gain total control of the battlefield. Leon had expected Ceylan to be capable, but he never thought the prince would pull it all off with this degree of success. On top of that, he had also needed to select the commanders who would best carry out his plans, something which also required skill.

Leon lit up a cigarette and took a puff. “Ceylan is around ten or so, isn’t he? His prowess on the battlefield is impressive, considering his age. Feels like I’m witnessing the sort of thing that got written about in the Chronicles.”

“They do say dragons birth dragons.”

“I was expecting him to be good, but not *this* good. We should be careful not to underestimate the kingdom.”

“You were expecting this sort of thing, sir?”

“Yes. Our plan depended on the fact that the other side would make the wisest possible choices. And so far, everything is going just as we hoped—which is exactly why we need to be careful of them.”

Any plan had the potential to be full of holes. A war depended on so many people that mistakes, delays, and misunderstandings were inevitable, and sometimes that ended up blocking off the most effective paths. The fact that matters had run smoothly for Leon’s side so far meant there was a very real possibility they were still to come.

“Sir, you said that once the capture of Dunbarroude and Maydalia were over, you would be seeking to attack Lainur. Don’t you think that might be difficult?” Dyssea asked.

“Yes... We should nip this problem child in the bud, I feel.”

“I think so too. Dragons freshly hatched are easier to slay than their sires.”

“I’m not so sure about that, sir.” This time it was Aluas who spoke. “He is the prince of an enemy kingdom. Wouldn’t capturing him be better than killing him? He would make an excellent bargaining chip.”

“You think we should take him hostage?”

“That’s right.”

Aluas’s idea was not without its merits, but there was a problem.

“I’m sorry if it sounds like I’m changing the subject, but I have to ask: Aluas, do you know about the story of the King Yanbakra?”

“The king who appears in *The Spiritual Age*, the second volume of the Chronicles? According to folklore, he was a foolish king who attempted to harm Chain, one of the Twin Phantoms.”

“Yes. King Yanbakra wanted so much to consolidate his power that he attempted to restrain the phantom using its own chains to take it hostage. Instead, calamity befell him, and he met his end. His foolishness was twofold: that he, a mortal, had dared to master a power beyond mortal comprehension, and that he thought he might tame it with its own strength. His hubris is instructive.”

“I understand that. History shows again and again that unchecked greed can become a sword which cuts its master. But powerful as the prince may be, I would imagine His Imperial Majesty very much wants him for himself.”

“His Imperial Majesty has already given permission to kill the prince,” Leon replied, for he had already asked.

The Emperor had, however, said more in that discussion than Leon would admit: that they must not underestimate Lainur or the Crosellodes, nor attempt to take Ceylan prisoner if it would be an undue risk. If the Emperor’s predecessors had not treated Lainur with such selfishness as they had, the Empire would already be in possession of half of the kingdom by now.

Essentially, the Emperor had already passed to Leon the lesson of King Yanbakra. If he did not kill the prince when he had the chance, disaster would befall him too.

“His Imperial Majesty joked that a simple beheading might not be enough.”

“People die without their heads,” Aluas pointed out.

“I’m hoping so. I would not put it past him to take after His Imperial Majesty.”

“Are you saying being beheaded wouldn’t kill His Imperial Majesty?”

“So the sparrows of the Imperial Court twitter.”

Leon doubted that anybody could survive having their head chopped off, no matter how far their power reached beyond human understanding, but if there was one man who could, it would be the Emperor.

Suddenly, a shout rang out.

“I-I have an urgent message for you, General Grantz!” The approaching soldier gasped for breath as he raced up to them.

“What is it?” Dyssea must have noticed the soldier’s lack of composure too. “Is there an emergency?”

Whatever Leon expected, it wasn’t what came next.

“The First Magical Division has been completely destroyed by Ceylan’s royal guard!”

“What?!”

“Uh?!”

“That can’t be!”

Tension rippled through the gathered men. That unit of magicians had been one of three fighting under Porque Nadar.

“Destroyed?! But they were supposed to be accompanying the count!”

“Yes, sir! They were pursuing Ceylan with Count Nadar, and the count ordered them forward in order to break through Ceylan’s guards! But they were destroyed by one of the enemy’s magician’s magic! The second and third divisions are uniting to do what they can, but the enemy’s magic is too strong, and they’re not sure they can defend against it!”

“What happened to Three-Walled Altar—the new spell Aluas shared with us?”

Surely now would be the time to use it?!”

“They did, but the enemy’s offensive spell smashed right through it...”

“Impossible! That shield can stand up to a full volley of Flamrune!” Dyssea protested.

Leon looked to Aluas. “Aluas.”

“It should not be an easy spell to penetrate.” Her slightly deeper tone let slip that she was just as confused as the rest of them. “Three-Walled Altar should be able to hold its own against much stronger spells than even Flamrune. Only an incredibly powerful attack would be able to break through.”

“And yet it did break. The unit of magicians who mastered it have been destroyed.”

Aluas could not respond. Though Leon questioned her, he himself was familiar with the extent of Three-Walled Altar’s defensive power. He had tested it thoroughly after Aluas shared it with them. That it was overcome so quickly and easily was nothing short of a disappointment.

“Was it destroyed by Crosellode magic, soldier?”

“No, sir. Ceylan only used one spell at the very beginning. As far as we could tell, it was a spell launched by one of his royal guard.”

“One? It wasn’t a spell launched by multiple magicians?” Aluas asked.

“It was just one. From his clothes, he looked like a noble boy—a very *young* noble boy.”

“What?! You mean that spell was broken by a *child*?!” Dyssea gasped in disbelief.

Leon had the idea in his head that the Three-Walled Altar was broken by Ceylan or a state magician. He found it too hard to believe it had been broken by some nameless child.

“What sort of magic was it?” Aluas asked, sounding just as surprised.

“It was likely that he was firing several black stones.”

“Black stones?” Dyssea said. “Black *stones* were enough to destroy the

shield?”

“Yes, sir. They smashed the count’s cavalymen and their horses into pieces, pierced through the shield behind them and c-completely wiped out the magicians... Even the most reckless of Count Nadar’s men have completely stopped in their tracks...” The soldier was pale-faced and trembling, as though he were imagining himself caught up in the magic’s destruction.

“You said it was ‘likely’ that he was firing black stones, but it sounds like you saw exactly what happened,” Leon pointed out.

“Sir, they flew so fast, it wasn’t clear exactly what they were...”

“How fast exactly are we talking?”

“It looked faster than a crossbow’s quarrel. Even the cavalry wasn’t fast enough to move out of the way.”

“Faster than a crossbow?” Aluas cried. “But it was magic. That’s just not possible...”

“Aluas?” Leon prompted, but she didn’t elaborate.

There was something suspicious about the way she’d reacted, but right now she stood completely frozen, struggling to process what the soldier had said. Only after she had given the matter some thought did she open her mouth again.

“Sir. Us Silver Heralds of the Dawn know of a law called the Falcon’s Swoop.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s quite simple. It is a magical principle that states it’s impossible to create a spell faster than a falcon.” Aluas paused before launching into a more detailed explanation. “The peregrine falcon is the fastest thing in the world. Even projectile spells are unable to match its speed; it is a law which all magicians creating such spells are bound by, and a law which comes about because it is impossible for magicians to envision speeds faster than that of a diving falcon.”

“They can’t ‘envision’ it?”

“That’s right. Try and think of some offensive spells. Projectile-based spells tend to emulate the firing of arrows or the throwing of lances and stones, don’t

they? It's because there are limits to human imagination." Aluas's voice fell to a murmur. "Imagining something you've never seen is truly difficult, and even if you manage to transform something like that into a spell, its effects will be unstable if your mental image is lacking. That is why magicians need to rely on their observational skills and past experiences to strengthen their imagination. Only when they observe, experience, and fully understand something can they turn it into a reliable spell."

"Hmm... I guess that's something I won't ever really understand, not being a magician myself," Leon commented. He glanced at his own magicians, who nodded to show their agreement with Aluas's words.

"There are exceptions to the rule, of course: spells where the magic itself holds speed, such as wind-based magic, and things or phenomena which are easier to imagine or create associations with; anything you imagine can be turned into magic. It's just that the more effective those spells, the more difficult it becomes."

"But what you are saying is that projectile spells tend to be based on the images of the examples you gave earlier?"

"Yes. Essentially, a falcon diving for its prey on the ground is the fastest observable phenomenon, but a quarrel in flight is a much more common sight, and just as fast."

"Since no one is able to observe anything faster, they can't create a spell that is faster than those things either, which is why the law is called the Falcon's Swoop."

"That is correct, sir."

"I see, so it's all about the limits of human imagination..."

Leon recalled one of the state magicians, Craib Abend, also known as Crucible. In order to create his specialized magic that he was known for, his entire body needed to be covered in burns. That must have been one example of how experience allowed a magician to break through the limits of their imagination.

"But according to the message, there is a spell which breaks the Falcon's Swoop law, which would mean the magician who cast it knows of something

faster than a falcon. For example..." Aluas began.

"Either some sort of phenomenon, or a projectile weapon which fires faster than a crossbow."

"Exactly."

"But that's impossible!" Dyssea cried. "If something like that existed, it would be even more powerful than magic itself!"

"Agreed," Aluas said. "I did say it wasn't possible earlier."

"Sir..."

"This sounds like something we'll have to look into as quickly as possible," Leon said.

The others murmured their agreement. Just then, another messenger came rushing into the encampment.

"Sir! Porque Nadar has requested reinforcements!"

"That was quicker than expected."

"What should we do, sir?"

"Hmm..."

They couldn't ignore the count's request, even if it did get in the way of the plan. They had to at least *pretend* to be on his side, or they ran the risk of him feeling sorry for himself and retreating with his tail between his legs.

But Leon wasn't prepared to act just yet. They still had time. Things were still proceeding as planned, and there was still no sign of reinforcements for the prince's side. All they needed to do for now was bide their time, so long as the field wasn't intruded on by any unexpected company. Their options for sending backup to the count were either to wait for the last possible moment, or to send them now and make sure they took their time getting there.

Reinforcements?

Doubt suddenly flickered through Leon's mind. It wasn't to do with the count's reinforcements, but the prince's.

Why hadn't *they* received any reinforcements yet? They hadn't even caught

wind that any were on their way, but that was impossible...

“Officer Coast.”

“Sir!”

“Aside from the count’s request for backup, have there been any other reports?”

“What sort of reports, sir?”

“Any sign of reinforcements for the prince’s side? Any sign that there are soldiers coming from the capital or any other cities?”

“Nothing at all, sir.”

“Absolutely nothing?”

“Nothing.”

That didn’t sit right with Leon. While he had laid the groundwork to prevent the enemy calling in reinforcements, they had to have more than the extra magical troops they called in at the start.

Leon had made sure that the pressure at the borders with the Hans and Granciel stayed on, but the kingdom possessed more than just its national forces; noble houses had their own militaries who could be lent to the defense effort. There simply *had* to be reinforcements available to the enemy from somewhere, even if they were keeping a fair number aside in case of invasion.

Yes, Leon had told Nadar that they wouldn’t be facing reinforcements, but he secretly felt the kingdom would be able to source at least a few somehow. Even if not a huge number, just asking a single state magician for their help would be enough. And if more than one, Nadar’s trifling numbers would be made short work of in an instant. That would, however, prevent the spoils and rewards from being distributed among the martial houses taking part, which was probably why they hadn’t bothered thus far. Still, Leon would think they could spare just the one, if not two. That they hadn’t didn’t make any sense.

“Is something the matter, sir?” Rivel asked.

“I find it strange that there are no signs of reinforcements for the enemy.”

“We have spies within the opposing forces and within the kingdom. They have reported nothing of the sort,” Rivel reiterated.

That could only mean there really *weren't* any reinforcements. But their opponent was Shinlu Crosellode. While Leon could see him not acting before the fight had actually started, now that the battle was underway, his lack of attention to the situation seemed nothing short of lazy—something entirely out of character for the king.

It was unlikely that Shinlu had worked out the exact details of the Empire's plans, but it was almost guaranteed that he'd at least considered the possibility that the Empire was backing Porque Nadar in the conflict—in which case the other side was surely making plans to deal with every possible outcome. The only possibility Leon could think of was that the subjugation force was moving soldiers in secret.

They must be planning to move a sufficient fighting force to give themselves the advantage in as short a time as possible so that we don't detect them...

Right now, Ceylan's forces had the advantage. But Leon could see them putting such a plan into action, should the pendulum swing to the other side. One option was for them to send a detached force around the back of Nadar's men, but that would risk undermining the prince's achievements in the fight. Placing the extra force under Ceylan's direct command instead was the best way to avoid that.

If such a force existed, it would likely be on its way already.

Leon hit the cane in his hand against his other palm.

“Dyssea. I know this is ahead of schedule, but I want you to make your move. Otherwise we might not make it in time.”

“Sir...”

“Take your men the long way around into the forest behind the enemy forces. Be sure to remain undetected, no matter what.”

“The forest? But sir...”

Dyssea was likely thinking that Nadar's side would be wiped out before he

and his men even made it that far. Leon was interrupted by a hearty laugh from behind before he could explain things.

“My time has finally come, has it?!”

Ninety-nine percent of the time, Bague Gruba was an idiot. But at times like these, he could be frustratingly sharp.

“Bague,” Leon said, looking at him. “I wasn’t going to ask you to act until Nadar’s defeat was certain, but we don’t have a choice anymore.”

“What are you saying, that there’s more to this fight than his destruction?”

“Nadar’s army is not the only party on this side of the conflict. Whose men are we?”

“Oh, yes, I see what you’re getting at now. What happens to Nadar was never any of our concern in the first place.”

“Exactly.”

“What should I do then?”

“I’d like you to scatter the infantry on the front line.”

“Okay, good, good! Such things are my forte, you see. I’m glad you said that, because I was almost worried you’d ask me to do something as dreary as to come to that pig’s aid.”

“I would never leave such trifling matters to you.”

Bague lifted up his twin battle axes, the weapons he favored, and let out an earthshaking guffaw. Leon pointed out the left side of the battlefield to him.

“I’ll leave you to destroy the enemy’s left flank, Bague.”

“It will be my pleasure!” Bague responded ardently.

Dyssea still looked uneasy, so Leon ushered him closer.

“Dyssea. Lend me your ear.”

“Yes, sir.”

Leon shared the key points of the plan with him, and for a while the two of them discussed things together. It was then that Dyssea’s eyes flew open.

“Sir...”

“As you can see, everything is going just as I expected. Understand?”

“Yes, sir!” Reassured, Dyssea’s response was resolute.

“I shall join you, in that case.”

That was one thing Leon hadn’t expected.

“What for, Aluas? I thought you meant to avoid taking an active role?”

“I will lend you a small helping hand; that is all. I am curious for a chance to meet the magician who was able to break through the doctor’s Three-Walled Altar. It won’t look good if I return with nothing else to say except that the spell was penetrated.”

On the one hand, having her interfere was a little inconvenient, but Leon couldn’t deny that she was a useful ally.

“I’ll ask you to help when that state magician enters the fray, then.”

“Very well. You may leave it up to me.”

Leon turned to Dyssea again. “Go now, Dyssea Lubanka. With the valor you possess, you should have no problem bringing down Lainur’s prince. If you do, Ceylan’s head is yours. That should be enough to fulfill your wish.”

“Are you sure I can have it, sir?”

“I do not like to take credit for my men’s deeds. Now go.”

“As you wish, sir! Elite soldiers of the Empire! Follow me!”

A fire blazed in Dyssea’s eyes. Only a man with a family to protect was capable of such fervor. Leon was hoping for Dyssea to achieve more from now on. If he achieved something in this battle, he could most likely ensure the stability of his family’s status within the Empire. Only once those concerns left him would he be able to step on the path to becoming a general.

It was with those hopes for Dyssea’s future that Leon watched him lead his men away from the hillock on horseback.

“S-Sir!” Rivel suddenly cried out in a panic! “General Gruba is—”

“Is what?” Leon asked, but he spotted the answer before Rivel could respond. “What the—!”

“He’s not heading for the left flank, but the right! He’s heading straight for Ceylan and his royal guard!”

“He doesn’t know his left from his right?! Does that man’s foolishness know no bounds?! What chance will Dyssea have of slaying the prince then?!”

His mind in an uproar, Leon gave the order to one of his men to put a stop to Barge.

Not far from Ceylan and his royal guard, Deet was leading his own cavalry. That being said, the men in the group were old Rustinell veterans, and he was relying on his assistant Galanger for much, so in the strictest sense of the word, he hadn’t been doing much “leading” at all.

Their position was the leftmost side of the battlefield, and their role was to hold the area between Ceylan’s unit and the main infantry line. Preventing the enemy infantry from getting behind that line was their main job. Galanger described their unit as a “buffer.”

As the enemy line spread out in an attempt to reach Ceylan, gaps opened up between the allied infantry and Ceylan’s unit. It was up to Deet’s cavalry to use their mobility and make sure none of the enemy soldiers targeted those gaps.

Personally, Deet saw no problem in allowing the enemy to flood through those gaps rather than having to go through the arduous task of guarding them like this. All his unit would need to do then was to destroy the enemy. When he relayed this idea to Galanger, however, he was informed that they didn’t have enough power to ensure it went well.

As Galanger implied, while their men were many, their reliability was less than perfect. Most of the soldiers were part of Rustinell’s main army; depending on the composition of Nadar’s soldiers, there was no guarantee they could achieve an overarching victory. Furthermore, they were duty-bound to remember and fulfill the task assigned to them. Ignoring that would risk being left out in future conflicts. Deet was already imagining the glory that resorting to brute force might win him, but he couldn’t; he had the future of Rustinell to

consider.

Besides, keeping things peaceful here meant he had the chance to observe how Ceylan fought, albeit from a distance. The sheer power and intensity of the prince's magic had blown Deet away—the thunder it sent through the air and the streams of light which dazzled and flashed over the battlefield. When the light and smoke finally faded, the soldiers who had taken a direct hit were left as nothing but charred corpses on the ground. It was a sight even more striking than the magic Deet had seen Arcus use before.

Galanger told him it was a Crosellode spell. A swift immolation in a burst of blinding light was the fate of every enemy who dared to stand before a Crosellode. It was a spell impossible to dodge or defend against, and it was the very reason for the persistent rumors, spread within and without the kingdom, that showing hostility to the Crosellode family was the same as digging your own grave. The fact that Ceylan had apparently been holding back with that spell made it all the more astounding.

“Galanger,” Deet began after giving more orders to his men, “I wanna do something proper already.”

“Your role is to command us; leave us to do the dirty work.”

“I can do *something* a little more exciting than this, though, can't I? Please?”

“Your time for mass violence will come, Master. Until then, just be patient.” Galanger refused to budge even after Deet's repeated requests.

Deet slid his gaze to the side. “How come *he* gets to do whatever he wants?”

“You mustn't compare your situation to others'.”

Deet's attention was fixed on one of Arcus's attendants, Noah Ingvayne. By the looks of things, Arcus had ordered him to split off from Ceylan's unit right at the start of the conflict. Now, he was working to fend off enemy soldiers trying to break through the front lines, just like Deet and his cavalry. The only difference was that he was using magic to block off said stragglers. He had frozen a wide swathe of the ground and scattered water on top of it to make it extra slippery. Deet had already seen several men step onto that ice unprepared, only to lose their balance and slam their heads. Some of them fell

forwards; others backwards. Those who fell backwards knocked into other men behind them, sending them sprawling like dominoes.

Those who managed to hold their own on the ice found their path blocked by the beautiful swordsman, felling them with a ceaseless barrage of ice shards before they could ever reach him.

To Deet and his men, the icy ground sent little more than a refreshing chill on the wind. To the enemy, it was a creeping bitterness that would penetrate the very depths of their hearts. They were shivering, though to Deet it seemed more out of fear than anything else.

Noah traversed the ice as gracefully as though it were solid ground. He even bowed to the enemy, treating them with as much courtesy as any butler should. All the while, he snapped the tip of his icy sword this way and that.

Whatever is the matter? You should feel free to approach.

Noah pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket as if to dab his sweat away.

Please excuse me. I seem to have worked up a sweat.

Then he would put a hand to his mouth as though he had just witnessed something heartbreaking.

Oh, it looks as though you have hit your head rather hard. How dreadful.

The exaggerated way he treated the enemy reminded Deet a little of how he dealt with Arcus.

Noah never stopped provoking and daring the enemy to attack before they were prepared, whittling down their numbers and chipping away at their will to fight. It appeared to be working well; the soldiers in front of him seemed to be losing their initiative.

Suddenly, there was movement within Nadar's ranks. A unit appeared before Ceylan's whose equipment differed from the rest of Nadar's soldiers. Their appearance alone told Deet they were likely magicians, but there was something a little odd about how they moved.

"Look over there, Galanger."

“They look a little too well-trained to be Nadar’s soldiers...”

It was just as Galanger said. Their movements seemed brisker and more refined relative to the rest of Nadar’s men, as though each was governed by a strict set of rules, to the extent it reminded Deet of Imperial soldiers.

“Men, prepare the Three-Walled Altar!” the head magician ordered.

The magicians conjured up a gray barrier in front of them. Its shape was unlike any Deet had ever seen, and it was remarkably thick. The royal guard attacked both physically and magically, but nothing was able to penetrate it.

“Flamrune isn’t working?”

“This doesn’t bode well...” Galanger murmured.

Since the royal guard was on horseback, they were suited to pulling back, but the current distances in play made that difficult. The enemy had magic, which meant long-range attacks; retreating would risk sustaining damage.

“We gotta help them, Galanger.”

“You cannot leave your assigned post, Master. Please be patient.”

“But if their commander gets killed and—ah!”

“Have you realized it now?”

“I should send somebody else instead of going myself, right?”

Galanger gave a satisfied nod.

Deet was commanding his own men. He could order them around on the battlefield as he did in ordinary life when he wanted a snack or drink. A single order; it was simple.

It was just as Deet was picking out the skilled men to send to meet the enemy magical troops that it happened. Arcus stepped out from among the royal guard. With him was his attendant Cazzy and two other cavalrymen. Displaying a skill on horseback that was impressive for nobles of the capital, the cavalrymen began to charge—right toward the enemy magicians.

Deet wondered whether they were planning to destroy the enemy before they could launch any spells, but he had no word for their charging right in the

face of that thick shield that suited it better than “futile”—especially since some of the enemy cavalry was now coming to meet them. The worst-case scenario was now that the cavalry would fail to break through the enemy before their magical troops launched their spells. There was still some time before they would be able to launch simultaneously...

And that was when Arcus made his move. He turned his horse so he was facing the enemy side-on, and murmured a spell which formed magical circles of Artglyphs. Arcus thrust his hand through the center, and the circles started spinning in opposite directions, gathering speed until a shrill sound pierced the air. Sparks as long as the leaves of a weeping willow scattered out between the gaps. The soldiers’ bellows were drowned out by the noise of Arcus’s spell.

A series of bangs. That was how Deet could best describe the sound, but that description fell short somehow. It was like a herd of stampeding horses. A basket of bursting chestnuts. A roaring cascade of water. A piercing heat assaulted Deet’s ears, and at that point, countless black, fist-sized stones fired from Arcus’s arm and hailed down on everybody in range.

Those projectiles flew far faster than a crossbow bolt, raining down from the sky like falling stars before Deet even had time to blink. Dodging them at that speed, even on horseback, would be nigh on—no, it *was* impossible, no qualifiers necessary. The enemy cavalry took a direct hit from the oppressive attack and was subsequently crushed. With projectiles of that size and at that speed, it was no wonder. It wasn’t just the men either, but the horses beneath them. They were strewn across the battlefield like pieces of scrap meat at a slaughterhouse.

The attack didn’t stop just because the cavalry were down; Arcus’s real target was the magicians behind them, after all. The black projectiles didn’t lose speed then either, immediately rushing toward the gray shield. The shield burst apart and dissipated into fragments as Arcus’s spell connected. Their shield penetrated, the magicians behind had no way to defend themselves, and met the same pitiful end as the cavalrymen.

Every other sound vanished as white vapor rose from Arcus’s arm. The battle cries, the clashing of iron, the thunderous footfalls, the roars and wails; everything. They stood in a sea of blood littered with human debris, the

craterous wake of some behemoth's smoldering hoof—a scene ripped from the pages of *Demons and Society's Collapse*.

The spectacle left every surrounding enemy soldier agog. They were frozen in shock, and nobody was telling them to keep moving. They couldn't even if they wanted to; they knew if they did, they would be that spell's next victims.

"My brother sure is amazing..." Deet couldn't hold back his admiration. With a single spell, Arcus had managed to destroy the shield where Ceylan's own men had failed. The spell he'd witnessed Arcus cast before was ruthless. This spell outstripped it. Deet had no more words to express his amazement.

"Wh-What was that spell?" Galanger spoke from beside his master, his voice strained.

Deet turned to Galanger and peered at his face, noticing he was looking rather pale. "Galanger?"

"Master...did you see that?"

"Yeah, I did. Why?"

"I just... I didn't expect him to have *another* spell like that in his arsenal..." Galanger's murmur held a tone halfway between shock and fear.

"I know it was amazing, but it wasn't *that* surprising, right? State magicians can do more than that, can't they?"

"That much is irrelevant, Master. State magicians are indeed capable of much wider-ranging spells with far more devastating effects."

"Right?"

"You don't understand; the range of a state magician's spell means there is always collateral damage. You don't want to set an entire town on fire just to kill a single man, yes? That would be a little extreme. The spell Arcus just used, however, had none of that exorbitance."

"Exorbitance?"

"What I mean to say is that Arcus is capable of creating results like that without the excessive power that state magicians hold. Arcus doesn't have much more aether than your run-of-the-mill magician, does he?"

Galanger was right. When Arcus came to Rustinell, Deet had heard that he didn't have nearly as much aether as was expected of children from magical noble houses. That was why most of his spells were designed to be as aether-efficient as possible. Deet felt like he was starting to understand what Galanger was getting at.

"Master, what do you think would happen if those spells were something any magician could cast?"

"Other magicians using those spells?"

Deet tried to imagine a division of magicians formation-casting what he had just witnessed and fell silent. He turned back to look at the disastrous scene Arcus had created. Arcus hadn't appeared to aim his spell; he'd moved his arm like a fan, and the magical stones scattered out from it in whichever direction they may.

The spell was blindingly fast and long-ranged, to the extent that it defied ordinary metrics. Unlike bows or slingshots, aim didn't seem to matter. Now Deet was really starting to see Galanger's point. If an entire unit of magicians used this spell all at once, they'd be able to sweep away the majority of their enemy all at once. Not just the slower foot soldiers, but even the cavalymen who prided themselves on their mobility, as Arcus had just demonstrated. You couldn't expect a formation-cast spell to counter it, and heavy infantry would just make for a bigger target. As for longbow archers, it would simply be a matter of who had the superior range.

Of course, this was a spell they were talking about, meaning its use depended on each magician in the unit being able to learn it properly. If the existence of the spell became widely known, it didn't mean armies would be hurrying to change up their tactics overnight.

More enemy magicians advanced. More than likely they were attempting to set up the same defensive spell as before. Deet couldn't think of anything more dangerous than attempting to use the spell again when they'd just seen it broken right in front of them. They must have thought Arcus had got lucky.

Deet sympathized with their desire to cling to such a thin hope, but he knew there was no way it would end well for them. Arcus launched his spell again

and, just like before, it smashed through the shield and destroyed the enemy magicians. Those who survived ignored Nadar's cries and stepped back to shelter behind the infantry. Meanwhile, Arcus seemed satisfied that the enemy magicians wouldn't be making another move, and returned to his position with the royal guard.

The guard welcomed him back with astonished looks; only Ceylan looked perfectly happy. He seemed to be asking Arcus a stream of questions and following him around on his horse. In fact, he was positively buzzing, something Deet had never seen from the prince before.

What's gotten into him?

Arcus looked a little uncomfortable as he responded. Only when Eulid intervened did Ceylan return to his normal duties.

The enemy's frozen cavalry eventually recovered from its shock and began barking out orders again. However, their infantry was already in a state of deep panic. Barely any of them could bring themselves to move, and many of those who could were attempting to flee, only to be cut down by Nadar's subordinates before they could.

"I can't blame them for running after witnessing what they did," Galanger said.

Soldiers fleeing the battlefield was common to every conflict. Valuing one's life was simple human nature.

"My brother's really something, huh?"

"I'm going to have to agree with you wholeheartedly on that one."

Ever since the two met, Deet had never gone too long without praising Arcus in some way. It wasn't just the magic that amazed him; it was things like the complex military strategies that casually came up in conversation with him. Every point Arcus brought up in the room in Nalvarond was well thought-out, and whenever Deet asked for an explanation, Arcus was able to provide a very satisfactory one. Deet had relayed the conversation to his mother before the fight, who had told him:

"You'll want to make good friends with that Arcus Raytheft boy. Got it?"

Even without her advice, he wanted to remain friends with Arcus.

“Shall we move, Master?” Galanger muttered suddenly, interrupting Deet’s thoughts.

“Really? Didn’t you just say I shouldn’t leave my post?”

“This is about adapting to the situation. If those ripples of panic spread through Nadar’s entire army, we can expect an immediate retreat. Dawdling means missing out on the glory. Plus...”

“Plus?”

“After seeing that, I can’t stand to stay here. I think now’s a good time to move out in any case.”

At Galanger’s words, Deet turned his attention to the center of the fighting, where he noticed the battle cries getting louder. They must have been bracing themselves for Rustinell’s main forces to break through that center.

“Finally it’s our turn!” Deet laughed. “Thanks, Arcus!”

He then turned to the Rustinell soldiers surrounding him and cried out, “We can’t fall behind here! Follow me, everyone! Anyone who misses out on their targets isn’t getting any drink with their dinner for a while!”

The soldiers responded with a heartening roar. Some of those cries were almost screams. Those came from the rougher types for whom denying alcohol was equivalent to a death sentence. With that, Deet spurred his trusty steed into a gallop. His mother had gifted him this horse for his seventh birthday. He had taken care of it since birth, so the two shared a powerful trust in each other. The horse was powerful too, able to gallop with ease even when Deet had his Guillotine.

Deet allowed the tip of his weapon to scrape against the ground as they pelted forward. He matched the rhythm of his breathing with his horse’s and felt its strength combine with his. The urge to decapitate that he had held back for so long was bubbling up to the surface, desperately eager to be satisfied. He was after the enemy’s commanding cavalryman.

It was as Deet and his horse raced past his target with a mighty roar that he

bared and swung his Guillotine. The cavalryman was cut clean in two along with his horse, sending a total of four lumps of flesh flying high into the sky. Drops of scarlet blood showered the enemy soldiers, and a muggy, metallic odor suffused the air.

The shapeless, scattered halves of horse and rider crushed men beneath them as they fell. Their allies who witnessed it let out a cacophony of dry screams.

“Watch and recall why they call this the Guillotine of Rustinell!” Deet cried toward the enemy.

“Master! Master, you should really save that line for when you have actually decapitated someone...”

“Shut up! Who cares what part of him I sliced up? C’mon! Let’s get going!”

“Yes, Master,” Galanger sighed.

With that, Deet led Galanger and his men to break through the enemy’s front line.

A berserker had appeared on the field when Arcus broke through the enemy magicians’ defenses and routed them before returning to his place by Ceylan’s side. A din from some distance away caught Arcus’s attention, and when he looked, he saw a fighter who couldn’t be described as anything else.

Said berserker was in fact the heir to House Rustinell. He was waving his monstrous Guillotine around like it was light as anything, thrusting it into the enemy soldiers and flinging them up into the air.



The men he killed never had the choice to stay on the ground. It was purely because Deet wanted to fling them upwards that they ended up flying. The moment he caught sight of a victim, there was no saving them. They were dead before they were airborne.

It looked as though they were on a reverse bungee, but rather than assisting them, their instructor was grinning a gleeful grin, making the entire ordeal far more terrifying. The blood raining down from the sky had dyed his russet hair a striking crimson.

The enemy was powerless against the raging storm that was Deet. His horse streamed through them, knocking them down in droves like a bowling ball striking down pins.

“Eugh. That guy just got his head?”

While his giant sword wreaked havoc in one hand, the eleven-year-old grabbed and dragged away the heads of his prey with the other as he passed, allowing the force of his grip to crush them. The grotesque image recalled a metaphor Arcus had read in books in the man’s world: they burst like overripe tomatoes.

Deet’s hands were just as small as Arcus’s, so he wondered how he managed to have such a powerful grip. Even the seal-engraved bracelet he wore wouldn’t fully account for such strength. Getting in a fist fight with him and losing with your life intact was probably the best you could hope for. Instant death was what would await you otherwise.

Arcus shuddered as he watched, but Ceylan was nodding as though the spectacle impressed him.

“A true Rustinell. I am most pleased to have a dependable ally like him.”

Arcus was impressed the prince was able to watch so calmly. He must have had nerves of steel. It was honestly starting to annoy Arcus that everyone around him was handling such ridiculous feats of strength with such nonchalance.

It wasn’t even just Deet who was putting on an impressive display. Eulid was scattering enemies with his engraved greatspear. Far from riotous, his

movements were calm and refined, immaculate as a moment captured in paint and canvas. He watched with cool eyes as the enemy approached before gracefully meeting their weapon with his spear, catching it, flicking it away, and then striking the disarmed enemy down. It was as if that spear were his prop in a dance.

Eulid's technique never changed no matter how many men he was facing, nor whether they were cavalrymen or foot soldiers. He was likely even more skilled than Noah.

Cazzy was also busy making waves. He was using magic to restrain the enemy and restrict their movements, which was when the royal guard would swoop in to attack. He was playing the role of support perfectly. It wasn't particularly elegant, but it worked perfectly because Cazzy was paying attention to his surroundings and sticking close to the fundamentals of what it meant to be a magician. Arcus could learn a lot from him.

"May my power take the form of a rope and punish thee! Moreover, extend those tails back to me. Ancient snakes, crawl across the ground!"

Cazzy cut off the enemy's movements with his Snake Rope spell.

"Scale the lawyer and Scale the scholar. May your eloquent speech quench the flames and become as my shield."

He used his flame-retardant Scale's Defense spell to prevent any of his allies' equipment from catching or spreading fire.

"Algol's flight and caltrops. I leave my escape to you. May hail fall upon the ground, and may that hail take root in the ground. Whether bear or tiger, one tread inflicts immobilizing pain. Pop and disperse; stab their feet to delay with jagged spikes."

He scattered out Algol's Caltrops to injure the enemy's feet.

His mastery of magic was impressive. His unsettling cackling made him seem rather sneaky, but it didn't take away from the deep understanding that lay beneath his spells.

Ceylan kept nodding and murmuring to himself, a sign that Cazzy's fighting technique had piqued his interest. It was likely because their styles were so

different; Ceylan preferred dominating with offensive spells, while Cazzy favored assisting his allies with supporting magic. It must have been refreshing to see an approach that differed so much from his own.

It was Noah, however, whose fighting style stood out most of all. He was following his usual strategy of freezing the ground with magic. The enemy was rendered helpless, too at risk of slipping to move properly. Noah would walk up to them leisurely, as though he were walking the hallways of an estate, before slaying them mercilessly with his frozen sword.

It was less a battle, and more pest control. The reason Noah did not slip on the ice himself was because his shoes were engraved with Seals. When Arcus had heard that, he was inspired to engrave a few on his own shoes before the battle too.

Noah was one of Craib's servants through and through. His sheer strength was overwhelming. It needed to be, or he wouldn't have been able to keep up with the state magician.

Since Deet and his men were on the offensive now, it appeared Noah saw fit to return to Arcus. He fought off the foot soldiers sent after him by the commanding cavalymen on the way, and as he did, a few other cavalymen rushed toward him.

"I was hoping I wouldn't need to use this spell..." Noah complained before launching calmly into an incantation.

"My sculptures of ice. A lovely expression. There is no distinction and no ascertainment. Even a phantom thief turns pallid in the face of your gorgeous craft. Allow me to gift you this pain. May water flow in place of blood, and turn the shattered flesh to ice, melting the drops of life away. Present me with your brittle body, and receive my wounds."

"Icy Substitute."

Pale blue Artglyphs formed a magic circle which spread out from its place at Noah's feet. The next second, several ice sculptures resembling Noah appeared all around the area. They matched the original to the finest surface detail. If someone told Arcus they had been carved by a famous sculptor, he would have believed them.

The position of each sculpture appeared to be random. Some stood in front of Noah, some behind, and others beside him. Each was posed differently, but none of them seemed to be placed anywhere that would obstruct the enemy.

“Gift”... “Receive”...

Those two words stood out to Arcus from the incantation. Noah stepped out to meet the approaching cavalry. He was totally defenseless, as if he was out taking a stroll, and he seemed to hold no intention of dodging anything. The rock-solid faith Arcus had in him was the only reason he didn't fear for Noah's life. Although perhaps if he weren't so interested to see what would happen next, he would have at least remembered to call out a warning.

The tip of a cavalryman's spear slammed into Noah's head. Noah stayed completely still. Not only was he uninjured, but the impact failed to even knock him back.

Instead, the head of one of the sculptures shattered.

“Huh?” Arcus let out a sound of wordless confusion.

Noah's countenance remained perfectly calm, despite having just been stabbed in the head with a spear. It didn't seem to inconvenience him in the least when the cavalryman continued to stab and slash at him either.

“It's not working?!”

“But that's impossible!”

“What the hell's going on?!”

The cavalrymen shared cries of confusion, yet Noah did nothing to prevent the continuing attack. It didn't affect him no matter how much they tried, and the next second he was pressing his own assault.

The confused cries were replaced with grunts of pain.

None of their attacks had worked on Noah, and he'd remained in place even when they tried to trample him with their horses. They were powerless; there was no strategy that held up against an invincible enemy. When Noah started attacking, they simply fell one by one.

Perhaps invincible was the wrong word; what was happening was that the ice

sculptures were taking all the damage Noah was supposed to be receiving. That was the effect of his spell.

“Huh?! What the heck is that?! That’s so unfair!”

“What am I witnessing?! I have never seen magic so sly!”

Arcus and Ceylan voiced their complaints at the same time. The timing was a coincidence; the identical emotions behind their outbursts were not.

Arcus had never even considered the possibility of a spell conjuring up an object to take damage for its caster.

Noah returned to the royal guard as they sent out cavalrymen in his place.

“Noah! You can’t have a spell like that!” Arcus cried at him as he returned. “It’s too weird! It’s... It’s not fair!”

“Regardless of your opinions, Master Arcus, the fact remains that I do indeed possess such a spell.”

“This isn’t about opinions! You made like, a ton of substitute Noahs!”

“The spell makes use of an account written in the fifth Ancient Chronicle, *The Magician’s Elegy*,” said Noah.

Ceylan seemed to know what he was talking about. “Ah. *The Dramatic Flight of La Pan*. The protagonist made a replica of himself to assist his escape from his enemies.”

“Very impressive, Your Royal Highness. That is exactly right.”

“I see.” Ceylan nodded.

Noah’s spell was a magical version of the trick used in that story. He must have decided to adapt it to something which could take damage from him rather than something which would help him flee, and based his spell upon that.

A sudden frown crossed Noah’s face. “I’m afraid that spell has a weakness that is not insignificant.”

“What is it?”

“Since it involves creating several replicas of myself, I fear it gives the

impression that I am somewhat narcissistic.”

“Who cares?! That’s not a real weakness!”



“Course they all look like ya!” Cazzy interjected. “Ya put ‘my sculptures of ice’ right at the start of the spell!”

“Precisely. Unfortunately, such phrasing was necessary for the sculptures to take on my damage. It is quite troublesome indeed,” Noah replied.

Cazzy looked decidedly unimpressed by his response.

The three continued to fight in their own way as the battle raged on. With their skills and the royal guard on their side, the enemy posed very little threat to them. Each one of them was able to defeat a small group of common soldiers without issue. Some of the royal guard were even crying out triumphantly as they claimed enemy heads.

“Why am I surrounded by superhumans?” Arcus sighed.

The mere sight of everything happening around him was enough to convince him he was the only average person around. If all these people weren’t blessed with reams of aether, they had some other incredible power instead. Arcus would need to put even more effort in if he wanted to keep up.

I gotta do my very best! Ah, I sound like Lecia...

As things progressed, it appeared the battle was going exactly according to the subjugation force’s plan. Ceylan’s presence was baiting the enemy into stretching their front line thin, and it was starting to split at its weakest points. It would be more than just Deet and his men who were targeting those points now.

There were several cavalymen ahead. Noah and Cazzy were busy in their own fights, so Arcus had to take care of things this time.

“The trick hall of a magic house. Rotations incite delusions of weightlessness. Step not on the floors but the walls. The ceiling faces sideways and the vases are inverted. Surprise, shock, amusement. Now try standing straight.”

A large magic circle spread over the surrounding ground. When the cavalymen’s horses stepped onto it, they began to wobble as though on unsteady terrain. They lost their balance and fell, flinging the soldiers atop them to the ground.

The remaining soldiers were taken out by the royal guard. Spells loosed from behind them kept the magicians relatively safe, and the way things were progressing suggested a smooth end to the fight.

It was around the time that Arcus was feeling more assured in their victory that a single cavalryman stepped out in front of the enemy infantry. He was better equipped than the other cavalymen, and his movements were swifter. He must have been of a martial noble family close to Nadar.

“My name is Byle Ern, retainer to House Nadar! Ceylan Crosellode! Deceived by baseless gossip, you have unfairly brought your army to fight against my Lord! You are not fit to lead our people!” the soldier declared loudly from atop his horse.

Perhaps because of his knowledge from the man’s world, seeing a man step forward in the middle of the battlefield to introduce himself seemed oddly surreal to Arcus. Or perhaps it was that surreality that made it effective.

The bloodlust rising up from the royal guard against this man insulting the prince was palpable. Ceylan was set to be the next king, and yet this man had stepped out unguarded to declare him unfit. Knowing Ceylan’s talent as he did, even Arcus found himself getting a little irritated.

“Arcus.”

“Sir.”

Ceylan’s tone was frosty. The prince was angry. It was his calm intonation which gave it away more than anything else. He didn’t even shout, but he was likely seething on the inside. That was what gave way to the quiet, bone-chilling notes in his speech.

Ceylan pointed his Chinese-style sword at Ern before giving his instructions—his *orders*—to Arcus.

“Go, Arcus. Slay that foolish man and bring me his head.”

“Yes, sir.”

Arcus’s response to his prince was instantaneous. Ceylan was likely instructing Arcus to kill this man because his purpose was to restore the morale of the

enemy troops. By having the very magician responsible for their damaged morale slay this soldier, Nadar's army would edge much closer to falling apart.

Guess I'll say a few words to help things along then.

Arcus led his horse forward.

"You're that—" Ern began.

"I am the magician, Arcus Raytheft. His Royal Highness has decided that a mere magic student is good enough to face an insect like you. If you don't want to die, I suggest you run home and tuck into a nice plate of the sausages you love so much!" Arcus didn't think too hard about what he was saying; he just strung together a few words to make fun of his opponent.

Ern's face turned red with rage.

Huh. I guess he really does like sausages.

It wasn't Arcus's fault. The man did work for a pig, after all.

"How dare you insult me, you magician brat!" Ern charged forward on his horse.

Arcus kept his grip on his own horse's reins. Ern took a straight path despite knowing his opponent was a magician. In fact, he was even holding a smug grin on his face, likely because Arcus was making no attempt to launch Spinning Barrel. If he tried now, he wouldn't finish the incantation in time, and Ern was likely confident enough on a horse to dodge any other spell he used. That, or it wouldn't be powerful enough to break through the retainer's extra armor. Arcus had no doubt that these were the thoughts running through his mind. But Arcus *did* still have a spell Ern wouldn't be able to dodge.

"You fool! A magician who doesn't even know to keep his distance is no match for me!" As Ern approached, he swung his lance at Arcus.

Keeping a close eye on his enemy's movements, Arcus grabbed his horse's reins and dodged the assault. Then, he jumped off his horse and hid himself behind it. Ern had lost sight of him, and his attack could no longer reach Arcus now that his horse was in the way.

"S-Such impudence!"

It was as Ern was struggling to reach Arcus that he started to incant.

“Unending light. Glittering beacon. Brightness and death. Like a revolving, twisting helix. Swaying, shaking, rocking tremors. Deathly light. Destruction of the heavens. Depart from the chaotic circle and fill my hand. Described in the birth of heaven and Earth, may the chant of reason dwell in my hand!”

“Zarach Ohr.”

Golden Artglyphs gathered around Arcus’s right hand before gathering in front of it and forming several circles. They shone with a blinding light which they seemed to steal from their surroundings before forming a small orb that hovered at the center of his hand.

Arcus stepped out from behind his horse and pointed his hand at Ern.

“N—”

Ern tried to dodge the second he saw it, but it was already too late. He would have been lucky if the spell was slow enough to only be missed in a single blink. A ray of light pierced his chest, shooting through him as though his chest were made of nothing more than paper.

The spell Arcus had used was a weaker version of Ohr Ein Sof, the spell he had used against the hex fiend. While this version would struggle to defeat a hex fiend, an armored human was no trouble at all.

As the spell penetrated Ern’s body, he shook violently and tumbled from his horse. Having lost its master, the horse started to wander the field forlornly. The area fell into silence before Arcus let out a thundering cry.

“Let it be known that Byle Ern, retainer to Porque Nadar, has been slain!”

The royal guards let out a mighty cheer at Arcus’s declaration, and he was satisfied this was what Ceylan wanted of him.

Arcus collected the proof of his conquest and returned to Ceylan.

“Well done, Arcus.”

“Thank you, sir. It brings me extreme pleasure to be able to meet Your Royal Highness’s expectations.”

“I am glad to hear it. Incidentally, about that spell you just used...”

Not again...

Ceylan stared at him expectantly.

“Um...”

And still he stared. As long as he didn't say anything, Arcus had no way to form an excuse, such was his relative social position. Fortunately, Eulid noticed what was happening.

“Sir.”

“What? O-Oh, no! You are mistaken! I said nothing! Did I say something, Arcus?”

“Huh? Oh, um. No, sir.”

“Did you hear that, Eulid? I was simply commending Arcus for a job well done!”

Eulid didn't say anything, and nor did Ceylan elaborate further. But just then, the silence was broken.

A rambunctious laugh exploded out from behind the enemy lines.

Not one ear on the battlefield was left undisturbed by that boisterous laugh, so loud it seemed to shake the entire Mildoor Plains. Only a genuine freak could laugh in a field piled up with corpses, Arcus thought, recognizing a note of earnest joy within the sound. When the laughter finally died down, the battlefield was overcome with silence once more.

Neither the sounds of clashing iron, nor the unrelenting battle cries of the soldiers, nor even the persistent ranting of Porque Nadar himself remained. All was still.

That stillness seemed to foretell something's arrival, or so Arcus felt—an ominous energy radiating out from some sinister presence deep within enemy lines, advancing like a pitch-black shadow beneath a swiftly setting sun. Eventually, the source revealed himself.

It was a single man sitting atop a giant horse. He led his horse leisurely

forward, parting the formation of enemy soldiers right from in the center. As the soldiers stood clear, those that were too slow ended up being kicked away or trampled by his steed. His merciless, conceited behavior had even his own allies backing away from him.

The man's height was astounding. His entire body remained clearly visible even among the sea of people. He seemed far too big, even atop the large animal he was riding—two meters tall, bare minimum. That size reminded Arcus of Cau Gaston—in fact, given how big the man looked from this distance away, it wasn't hard to imagine he was actually bigger than the marquess. He even made Porque Nadar look puny.

His abundance of hair was also conspicuous. His sideburns grew down below his cheeks to join up with his short boxed beard. The man's limbs were thick; to compare their thickness to the waist of a slender woman sounded like an exaggeration, but was in fact an apt description from what Arcus could tell.



A bull. He was just like a bull. It was like Arcus was looking at a shaggy buffalo astride a giant horse, and the absurdity of the mental image was almost enough to send him reeling. As he spurred his mount on, Arcus spotted two massive battle axes strapped to the giant's back. He was heading straight for Ceylan and the Imperial guard. The guard immediately launched a volley of arrows at the bull.

He let out a beastly laugh.

"You think you can kill me with weapons like *that*?!" he shouted before letting out a formless roar.

No ordinary human should be able to produce a sound like that, let alone at such a tremendous volume. It was so loud it transformed into a shock wave that exploded through the air. The next moment, the giant grabbed the axes on his back and swung them splendidly, knocking the cloud of arrows from the sky.

"Let those far away listen well, and those close by come and watch attentively! I am Bague Gruba, the most powerful warrior in all the Empire!"

With another mighty shout, Bague's horse broke into a gallop. The horse was clad in thick armor, but there was no weight to be felt in its nimble movements.

He *was* wearing the Gillis Empire's military uniform. There was no doubt about where he came from. While Arcus had suspected the Empire were egging Nadar on from behind the scenes, he never expected them to actually join in.

Either Ceylan had met Bague before, or he recognized the name.

"Impossible! What is *he* doing *here*?!"

"This is bad," Eulid said, his calm demeanor showing cracks of panic for the first time. "Every guard to the front! Hurry! We must protect His Royal Highness!"

Arcus quickly understood why; even though Bague was still some distance away from them, he could feel the man's military might like static in the air. It was like a poison that seized up his muscles. His body was gradually stiffening, and it wasn't long until he couldn't move at all.

The intensity made Arcus grunt inwardly. He realized just how terrified he

was. The panic he thought he'd managed to quash was returning.

You need to stop it, or you'll lose. You need to stop it, or you'll die.

That voice cried out to him, seeming to come from another part of himself. He didn't have time for inaction.

While that voice rang shrilly in his ears, the toxic, paralyzing fear seemed to leave him all at once. His body moved, unbidden. It was as though there were a second Arcus, controlling the first like a puppet. Arcus allowed the sensation to take control of him, and now he was kicking his horse into action.

He couldn't hear what those around him were saying. They were probably calling for him to fall back and reprimanding him when he failed to listen.

Whatever they were saying, Bague Gruba was right in front of him. A hundred meters ahead. Death was a hundred meters ahead. Panic spurred Arcus on, and before he knew it, he was casting the strongest spell in his arsenal.

"Infinitesimal. Join. Focus. Burst gently. Dwarf Star!"

Artglyphs gathered around Bague, forming a magic circle as if to ensnare him. Though surrounded by that ring, Bague did not slow his charge. What thoughts were running through his head as he kept moving, paying absolutely no attention to the magic about to assault him?

Arcus squeezed his right hand closed to tighten up the circle. The circle burst.

The shock waves and roar of the explosion shattered Arcus's vision. After the shock wave came the flames and black smoke. His aim had been perfect; Bague had taken the full brunt of the spell.

But then there was a shout. A shout whose volume blew away the smolder and remaining flames. The shout was familiar, but it shouldn't have been a sound Arcus would hear again. He looked up to see Bague Gruba was right there—both him and his horse, alive and well. While Arcus's spell had been enough to halt his charge, he was otherwise relatively unscathed, barring a pink wound on his face.

"W-Wait... That was a direct hit..." Arcus murmured, his eyes wide. He

couldn't suppress his trembling in the face of what should have been an impossible situation.

"You are the young warrior who slayed this pig's servant not moments ago, yes? That was some impressive magic! It's been a while since any kind of spell's been able to leave a mark on me!" Bague's words began and ended with an almighty laugh.

As the warrior leveled the ends of his axes toward Arcus, he felt an invisible, oppressive heat surge through his body. Even with the most powerful of Seals on Bague's armor, Arcus's spell should have left *some* lasting damage. The impact should have made him faint if nothing else, and the boom should have destroyed his hearing. What was going on? The fact that the horse was fine only added to the mystery.

Bague's eyes were filled with a savage greed as he stared at Arcus. Arcus gulped.

"By the time this is over, you, Ceylan, and everyone here will be nothing but flowers on the battlefield!"

The pressure from Bague's scream made Arcus's muscles freeze up again. With a swing of his axe, he swept several of the Imperial guard and their horses up into the air. The magicians at the back cast spells at him, but he paid them no mind.

"Wickedness of the snowy mountain. Decayed garden. A desolate field in winter. Cover the earth to still the advance. Rage, frozen wind!"

Bague brushed past Noah's icy wind.

"O, ruler of chains, may you leave these evildoers gasping for air and freeze them with your glare. Evildoers, be bound! Evildoers, be held! May the twin phantoms tie the chains of Hades to your feet and drag you down into eternal slumber."

He tore apart the phantoms' chains Cazy brought to life. And then he kept coming.

We're done for.

The difference in power between them was so great as to overwhelm Arcus with an inescapable despair. The Imperial guard formed a line right behind Arcus and his attendants, their movements slightly delayed. There was no room for Arcus; of course there wasn't. It was the Imperial guard's job to protect Ceylan at any cost. This was an emergency; their priority was clear.

"S-Save Arcus!" Ceylan let out a panicked cry.

"We cannot, sir!" Eulid replied. "Please! Evacuate immediately!"

"B-But..."

"Sir, please!" Eulid urged the indecisive prince.

Bargue was seconds away from barreling into the wall of Imperial guards. Suddenly, from among the enemy lines, came another soldier riding a horse. He was wearing the same Empire uniform Bargue was.

"G-General Gruba! Please, stop! You were ordered to attack the left flank!"

"Hmrgh? This *is* the left flank!"

"Th-This is the right flank, sir!"

"Hngh? Oh! I got my left and right confused, did I?" Bargue guffawed. "Easy mistake!"

"S-Sir..."

Once he was done laughing, Bargue pointed his horse in the other direction. "So long, Ceylan! Let us meet on the battlefield again!"

With those words, the storm of death disappeared from in front of them, leaving nothing but confusion in his wake.

"He's leaving... He's leaving now?!"

Nobody moved; they all stared in puzzlement. If Bargue had continued his attack, he may well have taken Ceylan's head, and even if he didn't manage that, he could have forced the prince to fall back and prolonged the lives of Nadar's men. He had thrown away a golden opportunity for the sake of a mistaken order. It made no sense.

Arcus found that he couldn't move. The rapid pounding of his heart wouldn't

stop.

“Master Arcus!”

“U-Uh, right...”

Noah quickly ushered Arcus back among the Imperial guard.

“Bargue Gruba. Slayer of Sages.”

“The Slayer of Sages... Who exactly is he, sir?”

“He belongs to the Gillis Empire’s central forces. Commando General Bargue Gruba. Having ‘slayed’ even his own sagacity, it is said he destroys every last enemy wiseman on the battlefield.”

Under most circumstances, Arcus would have found insulting somebody’s intelligence in such a manner rude, but it *would* explain the warrior’s baffling retreat. At the same time, he could understand how an entity that defied common sense like that had the power to crush any and every kind of strategy. Even just now it had been on the verge of completely destroying everything.

“Eulid,” Ceylan said, “would you have been capable of defeating that man?”

Eulid paused. “No, sir. However, I would have been able to allow Your Royal Highness to flee. Your Royal Highness *alone*, that is.”

“I see. That is not a sight I wish to behold upon the battlefield.”

“I am afraid this may not be our last encounter with him.”

Ceylan brought his horse closer to Arcus’s.

“Sir?”

“Arcus. Do not be so reckless.”

“My apologies, sir.”

Ceylan suddenly reached out and grabbed Arcus’s arm.

“Sir?” Arcus looked at him in surprise.

Ceylan lowered his voice so as not to be overheard. “Arcus. Allow me this, just until my emotions have settled. But do not allow anybody else to see.”

Arcus could feel how badly Ceylan was trembling through his touch. He

must've been overwhelmed by Bague's might, just like Arcus. Arcus was surprised that somebody capable of emitting such pressure as Ceylan could be so shaken by anything. Ceylan was the one who instilled fear in *others*, and he certainly had the power and authority to back it up. That was why Arcus had always seen the prince as somebody very different from himself, but perhaps that assessment wasn't quite accurate. Suddenly, that palm against his arm felt very fragile indeed.

While Rustinell's main forces were breaking through the center of the enemy's front line, there was movement on the center-right flank, where Count Daws Bowe was fighting.

Thanks to Ceylan's plan, Nadar's front line had been forced to spread itself thin, and its vertical lines would therefore also be in the process of weakening. Bowe did not miss Louise taking the opportunity to lead her forces there; he was keeping a close eye on her. Her forces had already managed to cut deep into the enemy lines, while Bowe's had been cut off by an impenetrable wall of infantry. The enemy had fought so fiercely that Bowe's men couldn't break through. It wasn't so much a stalemate as the allies needing just one last push to attain victory.

Horses' hooves whipped dust into the air, creating a yellow-brown mist.

Bowe addressed the attendants and aide around him with an impatient yell from atop his horse.

"What are you doing?! Just hurry up and break through!"

"They are resisting far more than we expected, My Lord!"

"Hurry up!" Bowe repeated. "Or do you want those Rustinell soldiers to take all the kills for themselves?!"

His men's inability to make a breakthrough was angering Bowe to the point that he was bellowing at them. Incidentally, his manner was quite reminiscent of a certain swine-like count.

All Bowe could think about anymore was the glory he could gain from this conflict. It could be said that it was the duty of martial houses to make

important kills on the battlefield. Without them, their compensation would be lessened, which had the added effect of them making a loss on the monetary investment they put into the fight. In some ways, Bowe's impatience at the situation was inevitable. But these weren't the only reasons he was so eager to attain achievement here.

It was also due to the many blunders he'd committed before the fighting began. He'd spoken without thinking in front of Prince Ceylan. He'd barely contributed anything to the plan discussed during the war council. Just because Ceylan didn't seem to care didn't make it any less of a failure. Bowe needed to achieve something in this fight in order to redeem himself. Doing so would be hard when his men were at an impasse.

"Why?! Why can't you break through that weedy line of battle?! Their front lines are already crumbling!"

"We're just infantrymen! We can't deal with the magicians they've sent in as reinforcements! They're too powerful!"

"Then send in all the cavalrymen we have! At this rate there'll be nothing left for us! Allow this opportunity to slip away, and it will be over for us! You know what that means, don't you?!"

The soldier whimpered. "Y-Yes, My Lord! Everyone! Strike with everything you have!"

At the aide's orders, all the infantrymen and even the cavalrymen who were positioned around the count charged forward without thought for plan or strategy. It worked too; Bowe's soldiers managed to break through the front line and cut deeply into the enemy formation, just as Rustinell's main forces had.

No matter how powerful the enemy resistance, they couldn't stand up to an attack from forces with no regard for their own safety. Their front line was being overwhelmed by the count's men before his very eyes.

Bowe laughed loudly. "So you *can* do it when you put your minds to it! Good! Keep going! Keep going! Keep up this pace, and get me those enemy heads!"

At this rate, they would win the scuffle. Bowe was already getting lost in his

triumphant fantasies.

“A message, Milord! There is something strange happening on our right flank!”

“The right flank? Hmph. That hardly has anything to do with us, now does it?”

“But our side’s troops over there are gradually being destroyed!”

“Destroyed? By Nadar’s soldiers?”

“Yes, Milord!”

“How?! What is happening?!”

Ceylan’s plan should have forced Nadar’s men into a hopeless situation. The subjugation force would not allow itself to be destroyed for no good reason, and Nadar’s men shouldn’t have had the means to do so.

The absurdity of the situation threw Bowe’s brain into a panic. Even then, the part of his mind that dealt with his own self-interest was working at full capacity. His options were either to go and deal with the enemy soldiers that emerged after breaking down the right flank, or to ignore the situation, keep up the assault here, and attempt to win the heads he was after.

A destruction of the right flank wouldn’t be of any harm to his forces. His were far from the only troops on the field. In that case, there was no need to throw away the opportunities in front of him and go on the defensive. If anything, he could see to defending *after* he’d broken through the enemy lines here.

Bowe was just about to give the order to keep charging when another messenger appeared amidst the yellow dust.

“A message, My Lord! We know what’s destroying the right flank! It’s all down to a single enemy cavalryman!”

“A-A single cavalryman? How is that possible?!”

“I-It’s a general from the G-Gillis Empire’s commando unit! Bargue Gruba!”

“What?!”

Bowe’s confusion was reaching fever pitch.

Bargue Gruba.

The count knew the name well, of course. What he didn't know was what the Empire's strongest soldier was doing *here*. The Empire wasn't even supposed to be taking part in this conflict. Those thoughts disturbed Bowe's mind even further.

"Th-The troops on the right flank are in a state of panic over Bargue's fierce attack! Baron Ronell and Count Sharman are taking charge and doing everything they can to fight back, but it is very possible that Bargue will overwhelm them!"

When Bowe was unable to respond, his aide screamed at him. "My Lord! There is a high chance Bargue will come for us next!"

"Wh-Wh... That cannot happen!"

The image of Bargue's tremendously imposing figure appeared in Bowe's mind, along with the despair that man inspired.

He was a raging bull atop a giant horse that destroyed everything in its path, bearing two battle axes that looked like relics from ancient times. Most terrifying was his extraordinary natural resistance to magic, which made him powerful enough to stand up to the highest classes of many nations. It was said that state magicians, for all the incredible power they possessed, would be lucky to inflict even a wound on him.

He was so powerful that it was said it would take Lainur's king, Shinlu Crosellode himself, in order to defeat him. For the western lords, the kingdom's bulwark against the Empire, his was a terrifying name.

Flight was already on Bowe's mind. Things would be different if the subjugation force had prepared for a fight with the Empire, but they had worked solely on the assumption that the Empire would not be a part of the conflict. Fighting that bull with zero preparation was pure insanity. Bowe would sooner accept responsibility for his next actions than that.

"D-Dammit! They expect us to fight?!"

"M-My Lord?!"

“I’m leaving! A temporary retreat! Dying here won’t solve anything!”

“But that would mean defying His Royal Highness’s orders!”

“So it would! But my absence here will have no effect on the kingdom’s victory! I’m falling back!”

“Count Bowe! Please, wait! My Lord!”

Bowe ignored his aide, turned around, and hurried his horse away.

Perhaps the least fortunate members in this situation were the infantry that were positioned directly behind Bowe. They hadn’t changed course fast enough to retreat, instead being trampled down by those who had.

“You’re a disgrace to this kingdom’s nobility! You’re worth less than the rust on the Guillotine of Rustinell!” Deet roared.

“D-Do not let that crazed child near me! He is as powerful as he is mad! Stay back! Stay back!” Nadar shrieked.

On the left flank of the subjugation forces, Deet was overwhelming Nadar and his troops, who were currently being forced back. Just after Bague had left, Deet’s men had succeeded in cutting through enemy lines. Deet was making use of the momentum to charge after Nadar, forcing him and his men to fall back to the west.

Nadar was currently crowded by both Deet’s Rustinell troops and some of the soldiers on the very edge of the front lines. Nadar’s army had already been growing restless, and now that desire to flee had spread completely through the ranks. The troops’ morale had fallen to the extent that they were looking to flee at the next opportunity, without caring that it meant the army’s implosion.

Their collapse was inevitable. The only question that remained was when Ceylan would receive the report that said so. The kingdom’s victory was as good as secured, meaning Ceylan and his guard were currently left with very little to do.

Having regrouped after their encounter with Bague, Ceylan and the Imperial guard were currently pushing a troop of enemy infantry out from the leftmost

flank. Ceylan was waiting for news of the enemy's collapse. But the message that arrived was very different.

"Your Royal Highness! I have a report! Part of our rightmost flank has been destroyed, and we have lost our center-right!"

"What?" Ceylan sounded as though he was finding it hard to believe.

"Bargue Gruba appeared at the right flank," the messenger explained, "and he charged our infantry there. They couldn't hold him back. They were wiped out, and the effects of that are spreading back through our ranks. Count Sharman took command and is replenishing the troops as best he can, but that's all that's holding him back right now."

"I understand the situation on the right flank," Eulid said. "But what of the central-right troops?"

"Which troops were positioned there, Eulid?" Ceylan asked.

"Count Daws Bowe's men, sir. They were positioned to the right of Rustinell's main forces."

"That count..."

Count Daws Bowe. That disagreeable high-ranking noble who had flared up at absolutely everything anyone else said during the audience and the council meeting.

The message said that his men had been lost, but Rustinell's main forces were positioned at the center too, tearing into enemy lines; it didn't make sense for the troops right next to them to be destroyed.

"Count Bowe's men were attempting to break through the enemy lines too, but were failing. That was when they suddenly turned tail and fled! There were losses among the soldiers behind who couldn't respond in time."

"Do you know why they fled? Even supposition will do."

"Sir...if I had to guess, it was panic and fear from Bargue Gruba's appearance."

"That is how he reacts at a time like this?" Ceylan let out a bitter scoff.

The battle was already at its climax, and victory was only inches away. That

was the moment Bowe chose to lose his nerve. Even if victory was assured, no supreme commander would be happy to hear that part of their formation had collapsed.

“The remaining troops were left in a state of severe confusion. Lady Louise has taken over a part of them and is doing what she can.”

“This does not sound good.” Eulid grimaced slightly.

“Why would that be, Eulid?” Ceylan asked. “The outcome of the battle is already decided. Count Bowe’s flight should have no discernible effect.”

“I agree, sir, but this has caused a great deal of trouble for Lady Louise, thus increasing the time it will take for this conflict to reach its close. There is something else that concerns me more too.”

“Which is?”

“That this might all be a part of the Empire’s strategy.”

“I see, yes... The very fact that they sent in Bargue Gruba means they are doubtlessly scheming something.”

The Empire definitely had a plan. But Ceylan and his men didn’t know what.

A pensive look fell across Eulid’s face, and it was a while before he spoke again.

“Sir. Take the Imperial guard and retreat. I shall take the rest and go off to plug up any gaps.”

Ceylan’s next words were not to Eulid, but the messenger. “Have you got the status of any other lords? I wish to know what effect Count Bowe’s flight had on them.”

“Yes, sir. Several lords have been somewhat perturbed by his sudden escape, but it is nothing more extreme than that.”

“Eulid. If I were to retreat, would our allies not start to crumble in a chain reaction? And if not, I should think there would be a risk of greatly damaging morale.”

“I disagree, sir.”

“On what basis?”

“Nadar’s army is on its last legs. As Your Royal Highness said, even a loss in some of our numbers will not lead us to defeat. The same goes for if Your Royal Highness retreats.”

Victory was assured the moment the allies’ central line cut through the enemy forces. Even the greatest commander in the world wouldn’t be able to turn Nadar’s situation around. Ceylan’s retreat should not influence the lords to do the same.

“Please allow me to reiterate. The impact from the loss of our right flank will be minimal. Nadar’s army stands at a great disadvantage. Our forces know victory is at hand, and Nadar has no scope for turning things around. Our main concern is—”

“Bargue Gruba. No, the Empire...”

“The Empire would not be here if they did not have some kind of plan, sir. As Your Royal Highness’s Imperial guard, I cannot allow you to remain on the battlefield the way things are now. I beg of you to listen, sir.”

The risk that the Empire was plotting to harm Ceylan somehow was high. The Empire had some motive for getting involved, and the most obvious was the prince’s head—so obvious that it was almost certainly the sole possibility. The flight of Bowe’s troops alone wasn’t enough to necessitate Ceylan’s retreat. They would just need to fill the gaps with more soldiers, and even if they left them empty, it wouldn’t have any effect on the battle’s outcome.

Since Bowe’s escape was influenced by the Empire, things were different. Their participation in the battle was never accounted for; the Empire had managed to conceal their plan until now, as they reached the conflict’s climax. Lainur’s forces never got the chance to prepare suitable countermeasures; it was very possible that the Empire’s plan would succeed.

The best thing the kingdom could do now was to send Ceylan to a safe distance from the fray before the Empire’s plan could come to fruition. As long as he was alive, the subjugation force would surely win.

Hopefully their plan didn’t succeed the second the prince showed himself...

Arcus thought.

“Very well. I shall withdraw.”

“Yes, sir! I need several of the Imperial guard to accompany His Royal Highness’s retreat! Protect him well!”

A few of the Imperial guard responded to Eulid’s request. Though Eulid had asked for the prince’s protection, there shouldn’t have been anything to protect him from at the rear of their forces.

“Have you got the substitute garments for His Royal Highness?”

“Yes, sir!” one of the guards replied.

He set up an armor stand atop his horse, took out some clothes that were identical to the ones Ceylan was wearing, and put them on the stand. From up close, it was obviously made from papier-mâché.

“They shan’t be able to tell the difference from far away,” Eulid explained.

“I see. Then they will not immediately realize that I have withdrawn,” Ceylan said.

“Noah,” Arcus said.

“Master Arcus. What may I assist you with?”

“Could you run to the back lines first, just in case? I want you to make sure there are soldiers there ready to receive His Royal Highness.”

“I can certainly do that. However, have you enough aether to hold your own?”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve got this.” A triumphant smile on his face, Arcus pulled a flask from his bag.

Cazzy’s eyes widened in surprise when he saw it. “Ya took that with ya?!”

“I had it delivered in case I needed it.”

“That explains the servant showin’ up from the old man’s place.”

“What is that, Arcus?” Ceylan asked.

“Huh? Er, it’s a drink that restores aether...”

“What?! Where did you obtain something like *that*?!” Ceylan was hurling a flurry of questions right by Arcus’s ear in an instant. Clearly the Soma wine had piqued his interest. “Why did you not tell me?! It is unfair to hide such a thing from me!”

The prince didn’t give Arcus any time to answer his questions before asking the next one.

“Sir, might I ask that you calm yourself a little?” Eulid intervened.

“B-But...”

“Arcus Raytheft. There is a reason you did not disclose this to His Royal Highness, yes?”

“Yes, My Lord. It restores so little aether at present that I thought reporting it premature.”

“How much is ‘a little’ exactly?”

“A flask like this would only restore four hundred mana.”

“A-Ah. Yes, that does seem rather little for a report... I see...” Ceylan murmured.

He must have been letting his imagination run away with him about the possibilities of the drink; his disappointment at the reality was palpable.

For Arcus, however, it was a lot. Right now, he only had around four hundred to five hundred mana left. He didn’t know what might happen next, so some sort of reserve was necessary.

“Might I have some?” Ceylan asked.

“Might I remind Your Royal Highness about the possibility of poison?” Eulid said.

“Eulid. You know full well that poison has no effect on me.”

“Yes, I know. I would just advise caution.”

It was a most peculiar exchange. Pretending he hadn’t just heard something quite remarkable, Arcus took a swig of the Soma wine himself. The alcohol warmed his body, and he felt his aether replenish by a small amount.

“Okay. Cazzy, you come with me. We’ll support the Imperial guard. It’ll be best to have as many magicians as possible.”

“No, Arcus. I would like you to accompany me,” Ceylan said.

“What?” Arcus stared at Ceylan, unable to work out the reasoning for the request himself.

“You need something, Arcus. You know what that is, yes?”

Those words made Arcus realize what he was getting at. He was only here now so that he could say he’d been on a battlefield. He’d never had an opportunity nor a reason to put his life on the line for the sake of fighting. He still had roles to fulfill; he couldn’t risk dying here.

“Yes, sir,” Arcus replied.

Just then, a troop of enemy soldiers appeared; they must have slipped past the allies. Some of them had been injured by arrows or lances, but they kept up the charge.

“Hngh...”

“Their soldiers must be getting desperate too,” Noah remarked.

“I’ll take care of this!” Cazzy declared with a cackle, before launching into a spell.

“Algol’s shovel. Dig once, dig twice; a big hole opens up at once. The doe falls; the boar falls. Drop into the round hole.”

The spell was based on *Algol’s Week of Farming: Thursday’s Traps*. The story described how the farmer Algol trapped animals for a tasty dinner.

The composition of the spell itself held much of Cazzy’s personality. The lyrical composition made the spell as pleasant on the ears as it proved effective. The final phrase was particularly impressive in its succinctness.

A pitfall opened up right in front of the cavalry. A big one, at that; but it made sense; the beasts that appeared in *The Spiritual Age* were always said to be large, so this size was likely just right. The cavalrymen had no time to avoid the hole, and ended up falling in.

“Impressive,” Ceylan commended Cazzy, at which he bowed his head politely. “That spell was inspired by Algol’s Week of Farming, yes? It was skillfully composed. Taken from a tale of The Spiritual Age, which already lends itself to powerful and effective magic, the spell’s focus was less on the user’s viewpoint and more on viewing the situation itself, as though Algol was actually here and carrying out the spell’s instructions himself. ‘Drop into the round hole’... That part was most interesting. While most magicians avoid such colloquialism in a spell, it fit in most excellently, especially in a spell this short. It even fits with *The Spiritual Age’s* elegance...”

Ceylan would not stop talking. He rattled off analysis of the spell like a machine gun. They allowed him some time to finish, but he just kept on going.

“Why you decided to become a kidnapper with talent like that still eludes me...”

“H-Huh? How does Your Royal Highness know about that?” Arcus asked.

“Hm? Oh, I-I heard from Lisa... Yes. She tells me much.”

It made sense; Lisa was Chief Officer of the Surveillance Office. An organization that was directly supervised by the Crown, she would have plenty of opportunities to speak with Ceylan.

“Please stay back from the pitfall, sir.”

“Now Eulid, you know I would never dream of trying to inspect it. Not me.”

Arcus was starting to feel sorry for Eulid having to put up with Ceylan if this was the attitude he took over every little thing.

Before long, the withdrawal preparations were complete. The main force of the Imperial guard was split into two by Eulid’s orders. One would remain here on the left flank, while the other would go to the center’s right side. Noah had gone to call for assistance from the rear. Cazzy would be staying on the left flank to support the Imperial guard. Arcus would accompany Ceylan.

Gray clouds were gathering in the skies above.

The royal guard split up, and Arcus and Ceylan were on the move.

They weren’t the only ones to have concerns about the unusual events on the

battlefield.

“Collapsed?”

The utterance, a blend of anxiety and resignation, came from Roheim Langula. He was the third highest ranking state magician after their leader Godwald Sylvester and Gastarque Rondiel, and head of the Langula House, who had instructed the royal family in the art of magic for generations.

His slender body was wrapped in a long black robe, and it was difficult to determine his age at first glance. His expression was invariably a picture of calm, and when he spoke, his tone was gentle, very much befitting his position as a teacher.

However, there were times when he would stand stock-still, resembling a lonely shadow.

He had a more conspicuous air of mystery surrounding him compared to the other state magicians, and many of those around him would attest that finding somebody more magician-like would be difficult.

At the start of the battle, Ceylan had instructed him to keep an eye on their magical troops, which was what he was currently doing, supervising from a position a little back from the center of the allied formation. It was during that time that the right allied flank was attacked by Bague Gruba, plunged into chaos, and ultimately destroyed. Roheim inevitably learned of the troops' destruction and picked up on the uneasiness in the air the news had stirred up.

At the moment he stood alone with his horse a small distance from the troops. His almond-shaped eyes narrowed as he probed for something deep within the battlefield. The leader of the magical troops approached swiftly upon his horse.

“Count Langula.”

“What is the situation?”

“My Lord! After appearing on our right flank, Bague Gruba scattered the infantry of our main line and the cavalry at the very right of our formation, and he is still fighting even now. Count Sharman and Baron Ronell stepped in, and the situation is now at a deadlock.”

“Count Sharman and Baron Ronell... They are both among the most powerful lords of the west, but asking them to take on Bague Gruba may be a little much.”

“My Lord, the right flank concerns me too, but I believe Count Bowe’s flight is the more pressing matter at hand.”

“Yes; that is a problem indeed. Say, what would you do?”

The magician was tense as he answered. “If I may, My Lord... As the outcome of this fight is already assured, I would move to buy the right flank time and send support to the Rustinell soldiers who have gone to plug the gaps. If they vanquish the enemy quickly enough, Nadar’s army will lose its integrity.”

“If we destroy the connections that hold the army together, his soldiers will flee of their own accord. Once Nadar’s army retreats, Bague Gruba—and the Empire—shall have no choice but to withdraw as well. That would indeed be the correct course of action to take.”

“In that case...”

“Despite my question, I will ask you to lead the magicians to the right flank.”

“The right flank, My Lord?”

“Support our allies on the right flank with your magic, and work to maintain the current situation. Those are my orders.”

“But My Lord, there remain enemy soldiers on the front lines. Should we not be moving to support the Rustinell soldiers working to fill the gaps?”

“Yes, that is important, as you say. I also think that would be a good idea.”

“Would that mean Your Lordship has a different idea?”

“There is a plan I can carry out which you may find difficult to suggest.”

“What would that be, My Lord?”

“It is quite simple. I need only take charge of this area alone.”

The magician’s eyes widened in surprise. “A-Alone, My Lord? But...”

“What is the problem? All I need to do...”

...is to fight with my full power.

The magician gulped as a shudder raced through his body. State magicians were a mighty military power of the kingdom. As a magician, the soldier knew how terrifying the full extent of his power was; it was impossible for him *not* to be scared.

It wasn't clear whether the expression on Roheim's handsome face was a desire to slay his prey, or a surge of eagerness to fight. Since the very outset of the conflict, the slender man's expression had been calm, but now it had all changed with the appearance of a thin smile.

While the magician stood in silent awe, Roheim called for a messenger. "Pass this message on to the Rustinell soldiers plugging the gaps..."

"Yes, Milord!"

"This is an order from state magician Roheim Langula. Fall back immediately and join the main forces. Should you fail to follow this order and remain there, I can make no guarantees on your life."

"I have heard Your Lordship's message."

"Very well. Now go."

The messenger dipped his head and raced off on his horse.

"Will Your Lordship be using the Waterwheel?"

"Yes. It should create a large gap in the centermost front of Nadar's forces, meaning we need not worry about their front line anymore."

"Understood, My Lord."

"I shall join you as soon as I am finished, seeing as I must deal with Bargue Gruba. Speaking of, try and keep him at the right flank, but *do not* lay a hand on him. I understand this may be a little unreasonable, but it is a strict order. Understood?"

"Yes, My Lord!"

"May the fortunes of war be with you and the rest of Lainur's magicians."

The magician bowed and left to carry out Roheim's orders. Roheim waited

until he was sure the magicians were well on their way to the right flank before he made his move. As he raced atop his horse, he saw that enemy soldiers were already coming in through the spaces opened up from his order to the Rustinell soldiers to back off.

Sure enough, there wasn't a single Rustinell soldier in sight. Roheim could only commend them for being so attuned to the situation that they were able to swiftly follow orders from a chain of command separate from their own.

Meanwhile, the movements of the enemy soldiers coming through the gaps exuded a confidence that those making up the front line had lacked. They weren't the movements of conscripted soldiers thrown together; these were likely mercenaries.

Their equipment varied, yet they all exuded a similar sense of danger. Their screams were crude as they charged through the subjugation force's front line. Either they were attempting to be intimidating, or they were trying to cover up how little morale they still possessed.

A bunch of ruffians raising hell on the battlefield. The image reminded Roheim of a younger Shinlu Crosellode, Craib Abend, and Renault Einfast. Granted, those men were much more impressive than these mercenaries.

Roheim found himself snorting disdainfully. He couldn't think of a more fitting word than "foolish" for being baited into rebelling against House Crosellode for money.

The mercenary cavalrymen's vanguard stopped just short of Roheim. They seemed unsure whether his being alone was part of their allies' plan, or some sort of trap.

"Hmph. There's only one of you?"

"Correct. I am here alone."

"So...you're a commander whose troops abandoned him or something?"

Perhaps these cavalrymen's leader had decided Roheim's head was worth a great deal. He would be right.

"I am Garo Dumz, leader of the Dumz mercenary company!"

“Is that right?”

“You have some guts, looking that calm in front of our company. Is that courage, or are you so dense you don’t understand how deep you’re in it?”

“I wonder.”

“Hah! Now I see why they left you here all alone! It’s not just your men either; we had those Rustinell soldiers running for the hills just a second ago! Tails between their legs!” Garo let out a crude laugh, and his underlings followed suit.

“That sounds most frightening.”

Apparently, these mercenaries were under the misapprehension that Bowe’s men and the Rustinell soldiers withdrew because of them. Their inability to interpret the situation correctly betrayed their lack of skill.

Roheim raised his index finger to the ignorant men. “Allow me to ask you something.”

“What?!”

“I have indeed been left here all alone—but do you know who I am? I wonder if you can answer me that.”

“You’re obviously stalling for time! Face us like a man!” Garo shouted, but the expression on Roheim’s face did not shift.

“You need not answer if you do not want to. It is not as though I need an answer; I am doing this purely for my own satisfaction.”

“You’re one fishy guy! Come on! Trample him!”

“My, my...”

No sooner had he let out that sigh than Roheim put his finger down and slowly raised his right arm, his palm turned flat toward them. He looked just like a student waiting for the teacher to call on him, or possibly an eager patriot of a certain particularly loathsome regime.

At the same time, he let out all the aether stored inside him at once. For a split second, it looked like fireworks were bursting all around him, and then the

aether—which should have been consumed—erupted like a storm.

His aether dyed the air and stirred up a great gust raging through the space around them. The wind slammed into his aether, creating pockets of air and sending it up high, high into the sky.

His aether began to impede the movements of everybody caught up in it.

“Wh-What?!”

The mercenaries started to struggle. Their limbs’ movements were sluggish and disobedient, as though they were sinking down into the bottom of a deep, gloomy river.

As the mercenaries drowned atop the hill, Roheim opened his mouth once more.

“Turn, turn, waterwheel, turn. Azure helix from Vaha’s deep seabed, stir the chaos of origin and swoop down. They come and gather in the center of this whirling eternity. They fill and disappear from the center of this perpetual echo. Come, be suppressed, overcome, gone. Broken, shattered, torn, scattered. Described in the birth of heaven and Earth, may the cumulation of reason appear...”

A huge tremor shook the earth then, felt in every corner of the battlefield. In the midst of that sea level-deep earthquake, Roheim’s spell sparked orion-blue Artglyphs into existence. Those deep blue glyphs multiplied without end, stretching up toward the heavens, spreading out over the earth, and spanning out as if to split the battlefield down the middle. The Artglyphs began to spin in a vortex right next to Roheim.

It was like a whirling tide formed by the current of an angry sea’s ebb and flow, spitting out droplets of aether as it spun. The Artglyphs gradually transformed into water, becoming a true whirlpool in the blink of an eye.

The huge whirlpool sprawled out lengthways along the battlefield. Its diameter easily exceeded twenty meters. It never stopped spinning, and each droplet flying from it could fill a small bucket.

The opposing mercenaries must have felt as though they were peering into the center of a Morning Glory cloud. It might even have looked like it was

accompanied by a giant snake.

Garó looked up at the disastrous phenomenon Roheim had brought about with despair in his eyes. His mind blank, his neck moved stiffly like a rusty tin man's as he spoke.

"The magician, Waterwheel..."

"Correct. However, your answer comes too late. Had you come to your conclusion sooner, you may have had a small chance to escape." Roheim let out a sigh, his response unfazed by the despair on Garó's face. "Even I must admit this is a little overkill, given the average show of ability on this particular battlefield. It is the perfect amount, however, for displaying the power held by our royal family. Be glad, for your lives will become a cornerstone for Crosellode's new generation."

"Eek!"

Every last one of the mercenaries made to flee from the hopeless situation, tails between their legs. But they were already trapped within the flow of Roheim's spell; at this point, escape was impossible.

"You were foolish to defy Lainur's royal family. May you return to the far-off helix of reason."

"Vaha of the Waterwheel."

Roheim slowly brought his raised hand down.

With the trigger word, the giant whirlpool trembled violently. The helix opened its jaws and raced forwards, swallowing up everything in its path.

The calamity spared no one. It took no time at all to reach its targets. The grass of the battlefield had survived the conflict thus far, but now it was pulled up by its roots. Even a thin layer of the trodden ground was stripped away.

The mercenaries had no roots; no way to resist the whirlpool's pull. Both they and the soldiers who stretched across the field behind them were sucked up into the great perpetual waterwheel.

Part 3: Protecting the Wish

The strong western winds shepherded great clouds over the plain, removing all traces of the once clear sky before anyone realized it. With that gray dome overhead, the surroundings were plunged into a gloomy darkness, despite the sun sitting at its zenith. It was a somber omen of things to come.

Arcus, Ceylan, and some of his guard were already far from the battlefield. They were far behind the subjugation forces and east of the plains, traveling on a makeshift highway cut between two patches of forest.

The road was wide, flattened, and well-maintained, as it was made to accommodate large carriages during peacetime. However, since tall, thick trees closed off the way on either side, the wide road felt strangely suffocating, and Arcus had a difficult time convincing himself it was just his imagination. Coupled with the overcast sky above, the atmosphere was so gloomy that it seemed darkness was close to seeping from the gaps between the trees.

They were traveling with the lowest permissible number of royal guards: ten. Most of them had been left on the battlefield so that the prince could retreat without having to worry about the conflict's outcome. The subjugation force already had the advantage, and now it was just a matter of time before they seized victory. The possibility of a turnabout no longer existed—and that was exactly why Arcus was struggling to pin down the source of the ominous unrest in his chest.

Three guards rode out in front, two to the sides, and five behind. Arcus and Ceylan traveled atop their horses in the formation's center. They were heading to the encampment set up behind the plains.

"Setting up a decoy of me reminded me of your plan. I just never thought it would find its use like this," Ceylan said.

"Indeed, sir."

"Arcus. Do you believe that papier-mâché replica will be enough to deceive

the enemy?”

“I believe so, sir. It should be enough to convince everybody that Your Royal Highness was on the battlefield until the very end, unless they learn otherwise.”

“Hmm.”

“Please excuse me for asking, but might there be something else troubling Your Royal Highness?” Arcus asked, picking up on the cloudiness in Ceylan’s tone. He had the sense that the prince was troubled beneath that veil.

But Ceylan didn’t answer immediately, despite the fact that he was usually so forthcoming and direct in his responses. It took him an unusually long time to reply.

“Arcus.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Do you think my judgment was correct?”

“Regarding the decision to retreat?”

“Yes. I would like to hear your thoughts.”

Ceylan appeared to be after a second opinion. Perhaps he was suffering from the same obscure anxiety as Arcus and was looking for some way to relieve himself of it.

“If I may, sir... I believe the decision for Your Royal Highness to retreat was a solid one, given the situation. Nadar was targeting you, and it was very possible that the Empire was too. If they were plotting something behind the scenes, then removing Your Royal Highness from the field would put a dent in their plans.”

“Could the Empire have been trying to turn the situation around in favor of Nadar’s victory?”

“They would need to be able to replenish their soldiers at the same rate as our side in order to do that, and even if they could, the Empire has little to gain from a victory for Nadar. Their best bet then would have been to wash their hands of the whole situation the moment it turned against Nadar so that their involvement would remain undetected.”

“Yes. That is what I think too. However...” Ceylan seemed to be speaking more to himself than to Arcus. As Arcus set to work untangling what he was getting at, Ceylan explained himself unprompted. “It is that scent. It still lingers.”

“A scent, sir?”

“Yes. There was a queer scent upon the battlefield, yet now that we are here, it has become considerably stronger.”

“Does Your Royal Highness believe this scent to be significant?”

“I do.”

For some reason, Ceylan insisted on using the analogy of a “scent” rather than giving a logical explanation.

But scents—smells—were everywhere. The earth outdoors, the fragrance of flowers. Indoors, there was the smell of building materials and furnishings. The stench of hot blood on the battlefield, most obviously.

Ceylan, however, seemed to be making some figurative point, and at this distance from the fight there were far fewer noxious odors to contend with anyway.

Ceylan was hinting at something else, and Arcus wanted to know what.

“What sort of smell is it, sir?”

“Cigars... No, cigarettes.”

“Cigarettes?”

There was no reason he should be smelling something like that here. The royal guards hadn’t smoked in the midst of battle, and even if they had a fondness for tobacco, they wouldn’t go so far as to bring it to the battlefield with them in the first place.

Something was there. And it was then that it revealed itself.

“Prepare yourself! Ceylan Crosellode!”

That voice was after the prince’s life. As its owner attacked from the right flank, something else came raging and flying out from between the trees,

horses and all. It was not one, but five, maybe six cavalymen, charging with their lances leveled at their prey.

“The Empire...”

“They’re launching a surprise attack *here*?!”

“Everyone! Protect His Royal High—Gungh!”

The royal guard reacted quickly, but it was never going to be quick enough. While Arcus and Ceylan avoided the attack by hurrying their horses, the guard holding the targeted flank took the full brunt of the attack and was sent flying.

“Sir! Halt!”

“They are in front of us too?!” Ceylan grimaced.

The moment after Ceylan brought his horse to a stop, more cavalymen appeared from between the trees to the right and in front of them, moving out to block their path. There was no way for them to continue. Their horses were braying as they were forced to a sudden stop, and the guard moved theirs in close to take on a defensive formation and protect Ceylan.

The number of enemy cavalymen who had appeared from the forest came to more than twenty.

Every horse and man was heavily equipped and clad in black armor. Black armor, black horses, black weapons, every last inch of their trappings. They wore the Empire’s crest on their chests.

What are they doing here?

The question took over Arcus’s mind.

They’d stabbed into the force’s flank before immediately blocking off both escape routes. They had been prepared for Ceylan’s retreat. Arcus was struggling to grasp the full picture, and right now he didn’t have the time to sit back and work it out.

“Tch! Descending spear. Deathly flash. Dazzling gold. Foolish men grovel upon the earth, and dirty themselves with misery, coming upon a golden spear. Judge. Ruin. May that shout descend from the heavens!”

Ceylan started to incant. There was a flash of light and lightning surged, but the Empire's soldiers scattered their horses before the magic took effect. They dodged the attack superbly.

Their movements were so smooth it was almost incomprehensible. They had excellent control over their horses, a far cry from what Arcus had seen of Nadar's men. Was this what Empire soldiers were capable of?

"Sir! This is the Empire's Black Panther Cavalry! We cannot underesti—Gngh!"

An arrow pierced the armor of the guard attempting to warn Ceylan. Now that he looked, Arcus could see the cavalymen at the back were armed with extra-large crossbows.

Ceylan gritted his teeth. "Forget about me! Protect yourselves!" he cried out, before sliding from his horse and hiding in its shadow.

Arrows flew from crossbows. They came down like a deluge on Arcus and Ceylan's guard. There was no time to defend with magic.

"Dammit! We—Ungh!" Arcus quickly steered his horse clear of the oncoming arrows.

Most of them were targeting Ceylan and his guard, so Arcus managed to dodge them, but a fair few hit his horse. The horse lost its balance and let out a pained whinny.

The second Arcus felt his horse going down, he used that momentum to roll off it. His shoes screeched against the ground as he killed that momentum and landed safely in a cloud of dust, though he ended up quite a distance away from Ceylan.

Several of the guard had fallen from their horses too. Another order rippled through the enemy cavalry.

"Get rid of the guard first! Use all of your arrows if you must!"

The enemy moved into action immediately. A new wave of arrows flew at the remaining guard.

"Tribe! I need you!" Arcus flipped open the window of the steel lantern at his hip.

Pale blue flames flew from it, leaving a trail of light behind them before taking on the form of a misshapen wolf. It had eight legs and an ephemeral beauty, like its body was wreathed with mist. It rushed at the approaching arrows, its eyes trailing ribbons of crimson light. Tribe absorbed the impending volley, which then disappeared as though the hound's body had burned them to a crisp.

"What *is* that?!"

"A wolf?"

"It doesn't matter! Focus your fire on it!"

Unfortunately, the arrows that came flying were too many. Tribe could not intercept all of them by itself, and the remaining guards fell from their horses one by one. While many of them survived, their wounds hobbled them.

Arcus heard moans of pain and cries urging Ceylan to escape. Tribe was back on the ground and letting out a deep growl in the direction of the enemy soldiers.

It had taken mere seconds for the entirety of Ceylan's guard to fall.

Only Arcus and Ceylan were left now—and not only had Arcus lost his horse, but there was still a precarious distance between him and Ceylan. Arcus could hardly think of a worse position to be in.

Dammit!

The sound of his teeth grinding echoed through his skull.

In the midst of that hopeless situation, the man who appeared to be the enemy troops' commander came forward and dismounted from his horse. Like the other cavalymen, his armor was jet-black, and he had a fine, slender figure. If Arcus had to guess, he would place him in his early to mid-twenties. His features were rather plain, to the extent that he would disappear if surrounded by a group. There was a powerful light in his pale blue eyes: one that hinted at a sincere nature. He took off his helmet, and then did a simplified version of the Empire's traditional bow.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Prince Ceylan Crosellode. My

name is Dyssea Lubanka, of the Gillis Empire's southern field army. I am their second-in-command."

Ceylan seemed to recognize that name.

"I know who you are. Dyssea, the hardy knight. You belonged to a low-ranking family at odds with the Empire before the Emperor recognized your valor and gave you a high-ranking position within their military. Yes?"

"I am honored that Your Royal Highness knows of me."

By the sounds of things, this man's reputation preceded him. But if a general like him was here lying in wait for Ceylan, it meant the Empire had meant to target him right from the start.

The real question was how the Empire knew that Ceylan had retreated. But it didn't look like this commander was willing to take the time to explain.

"You are after my head?"

"Yes, I am afraid so. All hands! Do not underestimate him under any circumstances! Surround him with your horses, and then strike all at once!"

"Sir!" Arcus cried out as the enemy cavalry surrounded Ceylan.

He was about to give an order to Tribe when the enemy launched a flurry of black lances all at once, their movements snapping through the air.

"Hah! Do not think such weak attacks can harm me, fools!" Ceylan's roar reverberated through the surroundings.

He made to repel the attacks with a flick of his sword. An intense wind sprang into being, and the cavalymen were sent flying back with their horses.

"Wh—" Arcus gasped.

"What was that?!" Dyssea sounded just as surprised.

Ceylan turned, his dark robe fluttering, and stabbed his sword into the ground. There was a thunderous roar, and then a fissure split the ground, sending out small tremors. Ceylan faced the enemy boldly, and let out a loud bellow.

"Do you not know who I am?! I am Ceylan Crosellode. I am *shén zǐ*! Know that

such pitiful attacks cannot leave a scratch on me!” His majestic voice burst out around him like a shock wave. That he was able to make such a declaration to the enemy in the midst of such a hopeless situation spoke to his future as king.

“He’s put his sword down!” Seeing it as their chance, one of the soldiers who was sent flying let out a hostile cry, as though ready to attack Ceylan again.

“Wait! I said not to underestimate him!” Dyssea cried hurriedly, but his warning came too late.

“Seven swords, invited from their layer of heaven, come down! The swords shine, their flares of light crushing all enemies. Noctilucent clouds, be ripped apart before the pounding of the drum. Mist and haze, vanish before that shout which agitates the sky at sunrise. Mix, contaminate, taint. Send forth the hails of those who praise the thunderclap, and may the sword of heavy thunder dwell in my hand!”

Ceylan had finished his incantation before Dyssea’s cry reached the soldier, and before the soldier could even move.

The spell produced pale blue Artglyphs, which spun atop Ceylan’s palm and morphed into a lambent orb crackling with lightning. When it had reached the size of a handball, Ceylan pulled on it as though he were drawing a bow. It cracked and fizzled until he had formed it into the shape of a sword. All the while, the white-blue lightning made contact with particles of dust in the air, creating a blueish mist that floated up around it.

A pungent odor enshrouded the whole area.

Arcus’s throat began to sting from the toxic ozone. And then he heard it.

“Thundersword.”

His spell complete, Ceylan released the thunderous sword from his palm. The air was heated to a temperature of thirty thousand degrees centigrade, and a powerful shock wave sent *everything* flying. The lightning blade crashed through the invisible barriers of the air, white misty waves radiating out from behind it, as it shot straight according to Ceylan’s aim. A power several times greater than the electric attack Ceylan had loosed before pierced the earth, and lightning scattered out in all directions.

Several enemy soldiers, including the one about to attack the prince, were caught up right in the center of the discharge. There were no helpless cries like those typically heard from humans on the brink of death. Nor did their bodies jolt and shudder as they usually would when suffering an electric shock. A single tremble was all they were permitted before they fell lifeless to the ground.

Ceylan gazed upon the aftermath of his spell, pulling his sword calmly from the ground. He had thrown them back and given a display of immense power, but still the imperial soldiers retained their will to fight.

They moved to surround Ceylan a second time—and Ceylan moved to fight back again.

Wait! This is no time for me to stand around being impressed!

Arcus admonished himself inwardly all of a sudden, as though he had been jolted back to life, and immediately ran forwards to support Ceylan. He kicked off the ground and hurried toward the prince, only to find his way blocked by an imperial soldier.

“Stay outta this, brat!”

“Grk!”

A black lance swung right toward him. He barely managed to catch it by turning his sword lengthways, but since he’d used all of his strength, the blow sent him flying back a long way. As he rolled back and got to his knee, the soldier came brandishing his lance again in an attempt to get rid of him.

He was fast. Much more nimble than a certain mercenary leader Arcus had once met. Even Arcus’s shortest incantation wouldn’t be quick enough. He no longer had his sword either. His stance made dodging impossible.

“This is where you meet your end!”

The declaration came down from above him.

His end.

That was what the soldier said.

The end.

This life, too, would come to its end.

This is it?

Questions flooded Arcus's mind as he faced his death.

Did he want this to be how he died?

Did he want everything to end here?

He'd learned magic. Invented the aethometer. Presented it in front of the state magicians. He'd even had an audience with Prince Ceylan.

But my life as Arcus has only just begun...

Wasn't he supposed to set out from here, to make a new life for himself and turn around the misfortune that plagued his birth?

If he let things end here, he would be throwing away all his efforts, and all the expectations of those who supported him.

Craib, Lecia, Noah, Cazzy, Charlotte, and Sue.

He didn't want to betray them. He didn't want to waste everything they'd done for him. He didn't want to waste everything he'd done himself.

Things couldn't end here.

"Not yet... I can't... I can't let things end yet!"

The yell came from within him, strangled out from the depths of his belly.

He couldn't let things end here.

He couldn't die here.

Arcus's heart roared, and the next thing he knew, a searing heat spread throughout his body.

The sudden heat that overcame Arcus's body as his death approached may well have been his anger at the injustice of it all. His body was so hot that it was almost unbearable. It was like the intense fever that had left Arcus bedridden in the Raytheft estate so long ago. It was as though his body were screaming out at having been put into such a precarious situation. Or perhaps his heart had started to tear apart, unable to bear the truth that it was meeting its end. His

entire body was on fire, its temperature rising at an unbelievable rate. The heat was enough to trap him, to make him fear that if he moved, that would be the last of him.

What if his body was charred?

What if it burned up completely?

Those anxieties became whispers which gripped at Arcus's heart.

What if the next action he took could never be undone?

What if he died?

Yet none of those risks were worth losing here. If he lost, all of his efforts to reach this point would fizzle out and disappear.

When he'd fought at the marquess's estate, he swore that he wouldn't give up. He said he would struggle. Even if both his arms burned to ashes, he had to resist.

The moment Arcus decided to keep on, the heat in his body burned even hotter. But now, for one reason or another, Arcus no longer found it unpleasant. His proof was that his thoughts were becoming clearer and clearer as the heat intensified.

It was a strange sensation, as though he were looking down on his body from above and controlling it from afar. As though he was in a zone of absolute focus—the kind athletes would talk about to explain their sudden explosions of brilliance.

It was a tiny window of opportunity and perfect clarity, cutting through a world cast in haze and murk in an act of ineffable grace. The soldier in front of him moved at an agonizing pace, as if he had just been thrown underwater. Arcus took the time to consider his remaining options. To his surprise, the answer came to him immediately.

He quickly moved the tempered aether he'd been concealing inside him to his right fist, and held up his arm.

His opponent wielded a spear. The distance between them meant that, ordinarily, Arcus's fist had no chance of connecting. In this case, it had no

chance of missing. In truth, this was a long-ranged attack. He'd used it before to knock the wind out of the magician in the Rustinell warehouse.

While Arcus took his aim, he noticed the soldier's features relax into a smirk. He must have seen Arcus readying his fist and assumed it a last, desperate attempt at protecting himself, but that was mere delusion on his part.

Arcus swung his fist, and the enemy soldier took a powerful blast of tempered aether right to his face. He'd had no way to defend himself, nor had he imagined he would need to. He staggered violently. Tribe leaped at him mere moments later with a horrifying growl and sank his teeth into the scruff of the soldier's neck. The soldier let out a scream, but somehow managed to hold his ground even then.

He held his ground, but it wasn't enough to erase the opportunity Arcus had created. This was the one chance he had to pick up his fallen sword. Grabbing it from the ground, he leaped forwards, and slashed at the soldier's neck as he passed.

"Gngh!"

He felt a resistance, as though he were cutting through a heavy pack of water. There was a sloshing sound and a strange grunt that wasn't quite a scream. Fresh blood spurted from the vacant neck behind him as he wiped off the blood that had stuck to his sword. He heard a *thud* behind him—a pleasantly final assurance that one threat had been removed from play.

But even if Arcus matched Ceylan in the number of men he slayed, there were still more than thirty of them here. There was no way of knowing how many might be hiding deep in the trees either.

There was still a long way to go before they were out of the woods, so to speak.

Seeing his comrade slaughtered, one of the magicians who had been positioned behind him started to incant a spell. Arcus picked up on passing fragments of the chant: "*Wind,*" "*Gown's grief,*" "*urged on by insane screams.*" A wind spell, most likely. From the flow, it sounded like it cited *The Spiritual Age* and had more than seven clauses.

The magician must have assumed Arcus wouldn't be prepared because of the distance between them. But selecting such a long spell here would prove to be a fatal error.

Arcus launched a counterspell of his own.

"Wind. Corps. Party. Collide. Smash. Void. Rend. Wind, create an iron wheel!"

"Highwind Wheel-Blade!"

The magician from the Rustinell warehouse's spell was just a mash of vocabulary devoid of syntax; it was much weaker than it could have been, but it far outpaced his opponent's in this scenario.

Arcus raised a finger to the sky and began to whip up the air around it in a circular motion. The air pressure flung up dust clouds around him as he aimed a wind chakram at the magician's still-flapping lips and let fly.

"Whoa—"

Strings of dust flew behind the chakram as it spun. It trailed along the ground and bounced into the air at irregular intervals, its course still averaging out to find its mark in the magician at the end of its path. Before he could even voice his shock, his incantation was cut short, his body cut into pieces and strewn every which way by the wheel.

Arcus had around seven hundred mana left.

He checked to make sure there were no more soldiers after him and decided that his next objective was to outflank the soldiers pursuing Ceylan.

Suddenly, the engraved tip of a black spear lunged into view. The Seals read *"wrath,"* and *"firebearer."* Just what Arcus needed.

"Miller of the river, miller of wheat. You lack skill, you lack talent. You are lazy, you cannot manage. Your flour rides on the air, useless as dust."

"Exposure Dust."

All the spell did was create a smokescreen of dust. It had no offensive properties, and the dust was made of mere flour, meaning it was easily dispersed—hence the crude and disparaging diction. But there was no other spell Arcus required in that moment more than this "useless" one.

The spell surrounded the spearman chasing after Ceylan in a thick cloud of flour. The wind carried the flour to envelop the soldiers waiting in the wings, until the majority of them were caught up in it.

“A smokescreen!”

“Do not cower! Blow it away!”

Disturbed by the smokescreen, the soldiers started trying to disperse it. There was so much powder that trying to incant now would risk choking on the stuff. They couldn't run either, since Ceylan could use that opportunity to strike them down. Their only choice was to use their hands and weapons—and that included the soldier with the fire Seals on his weapon. Whether reflexively or intentionally, he was already waving his spear around. Either way, it was careless.

At that moment, the sparks from his black spear ignited the flour, lighting the white smokescreen up brilliantly. Shock waves rolled out from the point of ignition, briefly deafening Arcus. More of the combustible flour ignited in a chain reaction, eventually transforming into a huge fiery pillar. The updraft created a vortex, forming a small fire whirl. The soldiers trapped within the explosive smokescreen had no way to escape.

They melted away from their armor down to their final screams, perfuming the air with smolder and charred flesh. All that could be seen in the midst of those flames were the shadows of men trapped in a hell of human invention.

For a dust explosion to occur, several conditions needed to be met; it was unexpectedly difficult to cause one on purpose. It took more than just dust and fire, which was why Arcus needed to recreate a mill accident through his spell, so that all the factors which made such an explosion likely were set in place.

Arcus thought the explosion had expunged most of the soldiers, but Dyssea and the majority of his underlings seemed to have escaped harm. It was as he thought: spells based on natural phenomena were less reliable than those such as Dwarf Star. He couldn't help but lament his lack of aether.

Arcus had six hundred and seventy mana left.

The remaining enemy soldiers were yelling, and while the explosion meant

Arcus couldn't hear them, he doubted they were yelling anything significant in any case. It would just be things like "kill him," or "get him." Nothing he needed to pay attention to.

Arcus used the confusion to murmur a command, sending Tribe ahead into the trees. After the phantom hound had sprinted away, terrified screams burst from the shadows of the thickets.

"What is *that*?!"

"I-It's Tribe! The Grave Sprite's hunting dog!"

"S-Stay back! Stay back!"

"Guaaargh!"

Tribe clawed at the soldiers, but its attacks left no wounds. They collapsed to the ground, as though their souls had been mauled while their bodies remained intact.

Tribe knew the trick of switching the substantial with the insubstantial. There was no defense against its predations. As soon as the hound had slipped through them, they were down.

Now Arcus wouldn't need to worry about incoming arrows. As he waited, another soldier charged at him. Arcus stayed perfectly still, pretending that his energy was totally drained. He staggered, making a show of being off balance. He made no noise as he stayed in his spot, and he gave the soldier no reason to doubt his victory. The soldier kept coming without fear of closing the distance between them.

"This is the end of the road for you!"

"Arcus!"

When Ceylan cried, hearing returned to Arcus's ears—but there was never anything to fear. Feigning defenselessness invited a bolder attack from the enemy. If the soldier's kill was assured, what reason would he have to hold back?

Just as Arcus expected, the soldier came brandishing his lance with a large sweep, making no move to defend himself. Arcus calmly lifted a hand, which he

aimed at the soldier's mouth. His intention was to steal something dreadfully important from this man.

"Snatch. Snatch away. Make it fatal. May every sigh be extinguished before this hand. Palm that takes the source of air, plunder their breath."

This was an offensive spell which stole the target's oxygen: Evil Exasperation.

The suffocating soldier fainted. The momentum from his charge sent him tumbling until he eventually lay still, without so much as a twitch. The spell made use of very few Artglyphs, so to any observers, it would have looked like Arcus snuffed out the soldier's life with a wave of his hand.

The true reason for the soldier's collapse was oxygen deficiency. Oxygen deficiency wasn't a phenomenon caused by being unable to breathe, but rather by a lack of oxygen in the air. Humans were prone to collapse when there was a change in the air they breathed.

There was no way for them to defend against such a change either. The oxygen supply in a human body was dependent on the exchange of gasses between the pulmonary alveoli and bloodstream. As it was an exchange, it only took a split second for the oxygen in the air and the oxygen in the bloodstream to balance out.

It didn't matter how much air you breathed in; if the concentration of oxygen you required changed suddenly, there was nothing you could do. You wouldn't even have the opportunity to consider holding your breath. It was a spell which took advantage of the human body's failings.

With the loss of another soldier, a second's silence swept across the small battlefield once more.

Before Arcus realized it, Dyssea and the rest of the imperial soldiers had turned their attention to him. They were taking a split moment to leave Ceylan to come at Arcus with all the bloodlust they could muster.

He had five hundred and seventy mana left.

The question was what to do with it. In light of Arcus's latest kill, they were likely too wary to come in close or be overly aggressive. That meant their only choice was to rely on projectiles. Arcus knew what to do.

“Nock your remaining arrows! Use y—”

“Forgive no movement. Forgive no flight. No man, nor bird, nor beast, nor insect can escape the stars’ punishment. The handle of the well is ever insatiable.”

A supporting spell which intensified gravity: Gravity Well.

Arcus quickened his incantation, concluding before Dyssea had completed his order. Violet Artglyphs spread out in the air in front of him and then twisted into a churning gyre. Soon, a bottomless pit formed at its center. Look into it, and perhaps you would be confronted with an abyss, if not the depths of the underworld itself.

As the arrows passed into that space, they lost their speed, unable to withstand the doubled force. Every last one of them fell dully to the ground before they could reach their target.

Arcus now had four hundred and fifty mana remaining. Now he was starting to feel the pinch. One option was to use another low-consumption spell, and one cast each of Magnetic Butterfly and Spinning Barrel. That might have been the best he could do, but it wasn’t nearly enough to defeat all the remaining enemies. Again he lamented his lack of aether.

“Wh-Who is that kid?!”

Arcus suddenly picked up on a frightened gasp. That gasp was irrelevant. Right now he was more concerned with his very familiar problem: how to break through this situation using his limited aether.

His destination was still out of reach. Those words came to Arcus’s mind as he looked over toward where he was supposed to be. There wasn’t that much distance between him and Ceylan, but somehow it felt so incredibly *far*.

More soldiers charged at him—one in front and one behind. It seemed there were still those who underestimated him. The soldier in front brandished a sword in Arcus’s direction. It seemed like such a half-measured attack. Compared to the way his uncle, or the man’s master, used their swords, it was hard to see it as a threat.

The enemy’s sword glimmered as it swept sideways. Arcus stood clear of it

with a faint backstep and slipped past until he was in close quarters with the soldier. As his target was small, the soldier lost sight of Arcus for a split second. For once grateful for his lack of height, Arcus hacked at the enemy's right leg like he was swinging at a golf ball.

The soldier's shin was flung into the air as he let out a scream. But Arcus still didn't have time to rest. Outpacing the arterial spray, Arcus thrust his sword at the second, who had been standing just over seven meters away.

"Wh—guargh!"

The stab from Arcus's swift right hand cut off the surprised shout. He'd used the same technique he started practicing a while ago to close the distance between them in a second. It emulated a martial arts step the man had read about. While Arcus hadn't yet perfected it, he still managed to perform it fast enough that the enemy's eyes couldn't keep up with his movements: the imperial soldier had no way to fight back. Arcus had slipped his sword through a gap in his armor and allowed the momentum of his charge to send the soldier flying.

Kan'are.

That was the name of the stepping technique—the product of an ancient martial art in the man's world. A shout from Dyssea interrupted Arcus's recollection of the word.

"Do not attack him individually! Surround him and kill him!" he commanded.

It sounded like they'd finally decided to attack Arcus with everything they had by attempting to surround him just as they had Ceylan before. All that meant was that Arcus now had all the soldiers positioned perfectly.

"I want for water. I want for it immediately. Blessings of the heavens, fall upon my fields."

Arcus raised his hand toward the sky, sending up several pale-blue Artglyphs which climbed higher and higher. They changed into torrents of water, which came pouring down as though buckets had been tipped over in the sky.

The water scattered around. It was just water. That was all this spell did.

However, the enemy soldiers' faces turned pale with despair.

"W-Water?!"

"S-Scatter!" Dyssea's roar reverberated through the air.

The soldiers seemed to recognize just how dangerous being soaked with water was in their current situation. While they may not have understood the properties of electricity, perhaps they had been at war with the kingdom for so long as to have learned from experience.

Because right now, there was one among them who could call down the lightning.

"Sir," Arcus said to Ceylan.

Ceylan looked back at him as if to confirm. Arcus nodded, at which point the prince began to cast a spell. The imperial soldiers turned to him, but it was already too late to stop him. It was only natural; just a second ago, they had been too busy focusing all of their bloodlust on Arcus. But that wasn't to say they could easily distance themselves from the water to escape the electric current either. That too was only natural; Arcus's spell had scattered water widely enough to drench entire fields.

"Crash. Scream. By the will of the dragon king, may this blinding light pierce through!"

The incantation was short. It didn't need to be long to simply transmit electricity. The lightning which shot from Ceylan's hand coursed through the water immediately. It reached the soldiers' feet and climbed up their bodies. Startled shrieks filled the air. Even after they had collapsed lifelessly into the marshy ground, the lightning slithered out around their charred bodies like snakes protecting their prey.

Arcus slid across the wet ground, kicking the electric snakes from his path in a splash of water. Eventually, the faint white smoke of Ceylan's attack dispersed to reveal an astonished Dyssea, complete with a hint of despair on his face.

"Impossible. How could you come away from that unscathed? You were standing right there!"

The answer was simple. Knowing that Ceylan's magic used a combination of light and heat, Arcus had engraved the appropriate Seals.

"Nonconduction."

Arcus spoke in the Elder Tongue, but the confusion on Dyssea's face did not change. Naturally, the concepts of electricity and lightning were not common knowledge in this world, so Dyssea had no means of understanding what that word meant.

Effectively, the Seals protected Arcus from electrical attacks—indirect attacks, at least.

"I-It's just not possible! You downed ten elite soldiers in a single second?!" one of the remaining soldiers accompanying Dyssea muttered, trembling in shock.

Meanwhile, Tribe reappeared from the trees, which did not escape Dyssea's notice.

"Archers!" he cried immediately. "Respond! What's wrong?! *Archers!*"

It didn't matter how long he waited; there would be no response. The work of the Grave Sprite's hound was thorough.

"Unbelievable..." This time, the soldier's voice was rife with despair.

He must have assumed victory was assured from the second they felled the royal guard. That had prevented him—and every other soldier—from predicting what was to come.

But then, Arcus used magic outside the confines of their common sense. He'd unleashed a supernatural phantom hound. He'd stood in water sparking with electricity, unscathed.

"Just who are you?" said Dyssea Lubanka, second in command of the Gillis Empire's southern field army.

The question hung in the air for a moment.

"I am the magician, Arcus Raytheft."

Heat burned through Arcus's body.

He was here. He was fighting. And he would prove that he wasn't a failure.

Arcus turned, this time heading for Ceylan. But when he took a step, his body screamed in protest. It was exhausted, made to perform the *kan'are* technique at its size. Everything came together then, overwhelming Arcus's body with a fatigue that made it cry and creak. After everything he'd managed, there were still more than ten men left standing. There was still a long way to go.

General Grantz's plan was flawless.

They would allow the subjugation force to believe they had won on the Mildoor Plains, create the conditions to induce Ceylan to retreat, and then slay him in a surprise attack.

It was *flawless*. It was a plan without fault, beyond reproach. The only thing that could break it was fate: for example, if the heavens themselves were to favor Ceylan. But nothing less than that.

Perhaps, even if Ceylan noticed the Empire's shadow lurking on the battlefield, he would foolishly choose to fight on rather than retreating. Or perhaps reinforcements would arrive earlier than expected in the form of state magicians, and Ceylan wouldn't need to retreat at all.

Save for these coincidences, Ceylan's head would belong to the Empire. That much was certain, and it was that certainty which made Grantz's plan perfect.

Even then, perhaps some consideration was in order. Though the heavens smiled upon General Grantz, half of the Black Panther Cavalry Dyssea led was lost. He wasn't left without a fighting force, but he had lost his absolute advantage, which was when he started to catch sight of a future where his plan might fail.

At the start, the plan unfolded just as he'd expected. Ceylan had begun to head for a camp behind the kingdom's lines, and encountered the ambush along the highway. First, the entire royal guard protecting him was eliminated, and Ceylan was successfully cornered. All that was left was to follow through.

Perhaps the predicament that followed the crucial moment was due to Dyssea's own cowardice as commander. He thought back to what Grantz had

said just before he'd been ordered to go and lie in wait for the prince.

Dyssea had been confused when it became apparent that Nadar's army was sure to be destroyed. In order to reassure him, Grantz had explained the entire plan, which all started with Nadar's revolt. The fight on the Mildoor Plains and the disadvantage Nadar faced there were all in line with Grantz's calculations.

"If we dangle some juicy bait in front of Nadar in the form of a position within the Empire, he'll go frantic chasing around after Ceylan. That pig can't see anything but the feed in front of him."

Not only had Grantz's scheme lost Nadar his position within the kingdom, it also made it impossible for him to surrender. Any hope for revival required him to depend on a nation hostile to the kingdom. And Nadar's position was frail, forcing him to accept any conditions that came with the deal. His mind had been completely occupied with that condition: Ceylan. That was how he had made the mistake of stretching his line of battle thin.

"There will likely be one or two among them who realize what Nadar's aim is ahead of time. Thinking they've one-upped us, they'll use Ceylan as bait to pull Nadar's line of battle apart. Just like that."

There was a reason Lainur had managed to fight off so many of the Empire's invasion attempts. It would be reasonable to consider that there would be those intelligent enough to sense that Nadar was not working alone. But that was exactly what would lead the subjugation force to toy with Nadar to give themselves the advantage.

"But sir, wouldn't exposing Nadar's line to such danger embolden the enemy? Very few of Nadar's men are real soldiers. If that happened, they wouldn't stand a chance."

"That isn't a problem. The fall of Nadar's army is inevitable, whether it happens sooner or later. So wouldn't it be best to let them fall as soon as possible and use it as an opportunity for ourselves?"

Dyssea still didn't understand what that had to do with the ambush on Ceylan. If Nadar's army were flagging, surely Ceylan would remain on the battlefield rather than retreat?

“That’s exactly why we throw in a wild card. One that nobody expects. One that will catch the enemy off guard.”

That was where Commando General Bargue Gruba came in. Lauded as the Empire’s most powerful warrior, it was said that he alone was a match for several armies. He was the exceptional soldier Grantz was planning to send into battle.

Bargue would send the lords stationed on the west side into an uproar, imprinting on them that a new threat was present on the field. He was a wedge that the subjugation forces wouldn’t be able to ignore.

“Then they will have no choice but to send Ceylan behind the lines.”

“But why? Even if General Gruba’s presence damages them, it will hardly affect the overall conflict. I don’t think that would be enough to necessitate Ceylan distancing himself from the battlefield.”

Gruba’s strike would barely make a difference to the two armies’ relative positions when Nadar’s line of battle had already been torn apart. Nadar was backed further into a corner the more of his soldiers were slain, and once the trend of battle was set, even the Empire would have no reason to keep fighting to the bitter end.

The subjugation force would likely put Ceylan as its head to keep pushing through. They may even be more eager to keep him in battle to avoid damaging morale.

“That’s exactly why I wanted to make sure Nadar’s men were at a disadvantage first.”

Dyssea frowned. He couldn’t see how that changed anything. If Nadar’s army collapsed, Ceylan would have even less reason to retreat. What was Grantz getting at?

“Listen closely, Dyssea. Ceylan’s role on the field at present is not just to lure Nadar around, but to keep the morale of his forces up. Naturally, if Nadar’s men go down, a sense of victory will permeate the enemy. And what will happen to their morale then?”

“It will remain high whether Ceylan is there or not.”

“That’s right. They have the Headhunter Witch on their side too. Any drop in morale will not cause them any concern; in all likelihood, they will just keep on pushing forwards. Ceylan’s retreat should cause them no problems.”

“Even then, is it not a gamble to assume that Ceylan will retreat?”

“That’s what Bague Gruba is for. Once they learn of his involvement, they will see it as part of the Empire’s plan, and I’m sure they won’t want to run the risk of him going after Ceylan’s head. They won’t want to push their luck when danger sits in plain sight. I’m sure of it.”

“The kingdom can’t afford to lose Ceylan, so they’ll have no choice but to play it safe.”

“Exactly. This conflict on the plains may be decisive, but it is also only the first scuffle. Even if Ceylan’s army dominates and sets the scene here, there may be pursuits and sieges on the horizon. Knowing that, having Ceylan retreat won’t damage morale, nor will it damage his reputation. In fact, Ceylan’s retreat was practically guaranteed the moment the collapse of Nadar’s army became inevitable. All they need to do from now on is make sure Ceylan is seen when it is safe. Then they can leave the bulk of the fighting to the Headhunter Witch or whoever.”

“And all of that means it’s only natural that Ceylan and his men will retreat?”

“That’s right. And they’ll retreat to the rear camp too. As long as they have that path, they won’t even need to split his guard up too much. Which means Ceylan won’t have that many men with him during said retreat—”

“—Creating the perfect conditions for an ambush.”

Dyssea could still see that cool smile on Grantz’s lips when he closed his eyes. His plan was solid and meticulous, one fitting his name as the Ever Victorious General. He had fought against the kingdom and their army of powerful magicians several times and, in his youth, built up countless successes, such as capturing strongholds and the Sword of the Radiant Heavens.

This was a man who had managed to long keep his position as general in an empire where those who failed to perform were quickly thrown out, and Dyssea

could see all that man was behind his smile.

What he said was true: Dyssea could undoubtedly take Ceylan's head. The fact that Grantz and Dyssea were in agreement over that point made it an inevitability.

Perhaps the fact that he couldn't was because, somewhere deep down, he had underestimated the kingdom's power.

Ceylan Crosellode. His pedigree was perfect. His father came from a line of royalty who were blessed with the power of lightning, and had a blood relationship with the dragon king. His mother was said to be descended from phantoms, making Ceylan's own blood peerless in its quality. Ceylan's power far outstripped even the rumors about him. A swing of his sword could clear the clouds in the sky, and his shout could call down lightning from the heavens.

He may still have been a young child, but he was not an opponent to take lightly. Doing so could mean fighting with a monster that could wipe out your entire army. That was why Dyssea didn't hold back with the number of men he took with him. He wanted Ceylan's death to be assured.

He never expected the other boy to also possess great skill. He had silver hair, and looked just as young as Ceylan. His features were soft and feminine, and at first Dyssea had mistaken him for a girl. In fact, he had taken him to be a young page, present only for some noble's entertainment. And even if he wasn't, Dyssea was certain he wouldn't be capable of fighting.

The boy proved him wrong. Dyssea had judged that there would be no danger in ignoring him. He had paid the price for that miscalculation in his soldiers' blood. Before Dyssea could process what was going on, the Black Panther Cavalry were steadily picked off by that boy. All he was doing was setting the stage for Ceylan's attack, and yet he managed to take out eleven soldiers in the process. Sometimes he would use magic to achieve his ends, and sometimes he would make use of martial arts that far surpassed his years. Dyssea never caught sight of each attack's final movements, which left him full of so much wonder it felt as though he were caught in a daydream.

And then there was the presence of Tribe, the Phantom Hound, the loyal beast the Grave Sprite used to chase down grave-robbers. That he was

permitted to call upon such a creature put him on the same level as the saints of *The Spiritual Age*.

It had taken him less than five minutes to slay more than ten men of the Black Panther Cavalry. From his appearance, he couldn't have been much older than ten. Most children his age wouldn't have outgrown playing with toys. That he could do so much at his age was already cause enough to fear him, but what surprised Dyssea most was that he had the means to protect himself against some of Lainur's most terrifying magic.

Dyssea didn't know what other magic he might be hiding up his sleeve. It was possible that he was a magician on the same level as Ceylan. The boy had made it back to Ceylan and taken up a protective stance. He was empty-handed; his sword had gone flying away with one of the Black Cavalrymen he'd stabbed.

He did not shout or roar; he stood there in silence. But the air around him and the look in his eyes were as hot and sharp as any flame, a testament to the boy's true power.

"I beg of you not to forget father's words. Before victory lies the narrow boundary between life and death."

He heard his sister's words somewhere in the back of his mind.

Before victory lay the narrow boundary between life and death.

Dyssea had heard his father repeat those words so often. They were never to meet again after Bague Gruba slew him, but those words remained clear in his mind even now. Before great victory stood a great obstacle.

For his father, that obstacle was Bague Gruba. For him, it must have been this boy.

Dyssea fixed his gaze on the two magicians before letting out a shout.

"This is an order! Kill them, even if it means losing your lives! Mark my words! They *must* die!"

There was no telling what troubles might arise should the boys be allowed to escape—only that they were inevitable. If Dyssea got through this, it would mean he had passed over death. History told of the great power and

experiences fostered by those soldiers who had managed to return from the brink of death, but the price would have to be paid in mountains of dead imperial soldiers.

If these two boys were allowed to escape, Ceylan would become a king armed with a power fit to claim ascent to the heavens themselves.

The tendrils of lightning writhing on the ground were starting to fizzle out. The bodies left in the attack's wake were unrecognizable; the stench of smoldering flesh hung in the air. It was a gruesome scene, one Arcus may well have averted his eyes from in peacetime. But he had no time to worry about that now. They were still in a tough spot, one that could easily spell their end if he let his guard down for even a second.

From their efforts just now, they had managed to cut down the number of enemies. That sounded much grander than the reality. Ten soldiers were down, but for that, Arcus had used three spells. He hadn't even done it alone; he had required Ceylan's help. And he had only managed to take down ten men and the archers with Tribe's assistance. Compared to magicians like Noah or Cazzy, who would probably have been free and clear by now, it was shameful.

Arcus's concerns weren't just for him and Ceylan, but for the health of the surviving royal guards. If they didn't receive medical assistance soon, their lives would be at risk. And yet, admirably, they were still trying to crawl their way back to Ceylan's side. Ceylan called out to them from behind Arcus.

"Stay where you are."

"Sir, I must be your shield."

"Only as a last resort. Listen to me."

Ceylan had ordered them to prioritize their own safety. Just like when they were under fire, the prince had a habit of occasionally putting others before himself. It was natural for a king to put himself first, and for the most part, Ceylan had followed that axiom to the letter. However, he may only have been doing that out of necessity, and not because he really wanted to. Otherwise, he wouldn't have had any qualms about using his guards as pawns. Ordering them to sacrifice themselves in an attack was a viable strategy at this point.

But Ceylan didn't do it. He valued other people's lives.

The conscious guards groaned in frustration at Ceylan's order. Arcus could only imagine what was going through their minds right now.

There were still more than twenty enemy soldiers in front of them. While they had seemed frozen with shock for a moment at the sudden loss of so many men, Dyssea revived their fighting spirit with a shout. Every pair of eyes before them now blazed with bloodlust. They began to stir, and Arcus no longer had time to think any further.

"I'm going. Everyone else, focus on Ceylan."

Imperial soldiers approached Arcus from three directions. Four came from the right and five from the left, with a supporting line waiting behind them. Directly across from Arcus was Dyssea, their commander. He was a powerful warrior—strong enough to have earned a *sobriquet rouge*, in any case. Arcus could not afford to underestimate him.

"I'll hold the front. Could Your Royal Highness take care of the rest?" Arcus whispered.

"I can. Will you manage?"

"For as long as it takes you to bring them down, sir."

Arcus knew it would be a tall order, but as long as he could lock Dyssea and Ceylan into a one-on-one fight, they could get through this. Unlike Arcus, Ceylan had plenty of aether, impressive physical ability, and exceptional combat prowess. He could handle Dyssea man to man.

Arcus turned to Tribe to ask it to help keep back the imperial soldiers, but he stopped when he caught sight of the hound.

"Tribe? What's wrong?"

Tribe was peering deep into the trees and growling. Its silhouette began to flicker. Arcus barely had time to wonder what was happening when Tribe was suddenly sucked back in through his lantern's window.

"Hey!" Arcus cried, but the steel lantern was still.

Tribe had returned to the lantern of its own volition before, but this time it

seemed more like the lantern had pulled it back in.

A time limit?

That was the first thought that popped into Arcus's head. That would explain why Tribe had ignored Arcus and gone back into the lantern the previous time as well.

The disappearance of their second toughest opponent after Ceylan lifted the enemy soldiers' spirits.

"Looks like you've lost your last ray of hope."

Arcus grimaced. What could he do now? He could break through with magic if he had the aether for it, but grumbling wasn't going to fill his reserves.

Ceylan caught him mid-stride and whispered into his ear.

"I'll cast. White smoke. Dyssea will avoid. Step away. Then use black pebbles."

Arcus caught the gist of what Ceylan was getting at, so he went ahead and stepped forwards. He wouldn't hold back. He stepped in place, adjusting his pace to ready for *kan'are*. Dyssea came brandishing his sword. Arcus leaped forwards, ready to deliver a dropkick.

They were each charging, approaching each other at blistering speed—but then Arcus found that Dyssea had caught his kick with his forearm.

"Who do you think you are attacking *me*, brat?!"

"Someone who's not gonna let you just go ahead and do whatever you want!" Arcus yelled as he stuck the landing.

Arcus took a quick glance to his side to ascertain his surroundings. All the other enemy soldiers were going after Ceylan. They were probably confident that Dyssea could take care of himself, or they just saw Ceylan as an absolute priority.

Dyssea slashed at Arcus with his longsword. It was a more precise swing than the soldier before him, slicing down from above. Arcus slid clear of it. He was a small target close to the ground—an elusive mark.

Since Arcus was unarmed, dodging was his only option. He had no visible

means of attack, but for some reason Dyssea seemed satisfied to give Arcus his full attention. Perhaps it was because he no longer considered Ceylan their only target, as his earlier order had implied. Arcus didn't know why Dyssea suddenly decided he had to die too, but right now he was grateful for it.

Several slashes came his way as Dyssea tried to hack him to pieces. Arcus did all he could to dodge each blow, but the attacks were fast, precise, and relentless. The blood that seeped from his body where the blade's tip nicked him was proof that his defense was wearing down.

"Gnngh..."

On his arms, his legs, and his face. Each was no more than a graze, but too many could prove fatal.

Arcus took an opportunity between slashes to jump in close. Dyssea immediately backstepped, swiping with his sword to drive Arcus back—an attack he only just dodged by throwing himself onto the ground.

Arcus pushed off the ground with both hands, springing back to his former position. His arms screamed in protest at the rough treatment, but he ignored them. Wary that they might give up completely if he kept pushing them as he was, he jumped in close to Dyssea again. Again, Dyssea stepped back with a grunt.

Their difference in size meant Dyssea could grab and pin Arcus down to finish him easily, but Arcus's efforts to narrow the gap between them rendered it moot. Dyssea must've realized that to let him do so was dangerous. His instincts were correct. Arcus had an idea to break out of this stalemate, if he could just get in a little closer.

"You just don't give up..." Dyssea grumbled as his attacks fell short again and again. It seemed impatience was starting to poison his mind—something Arcus could exploit.

The more he dodged, the more frustrated Dyssea became. Arcus observed him and, when the time was just right, gave Dyssea an obvious opening.

"I got y—"

Dyssea went right in for the slash, before realizing what he'd done halfway

through his movement—that he’d done exactly as Arcus wanted. In all likelihood, he’d never expected a child to use a feint like that.

Such a movement was too clumsy for an opponent like Craib, who would’ve seen through Arcus instantly and connected with a hard strike, but when it came to an opponent whose patience was fraying, it was worth a shot—and in this case, it worked just as Arcus had hoped. Not prepared to let his small success go to waste, Arcus jumped in close to Dyssea and managed to stay there this time.

He was unarmed, low on aether, and wouldn’t have time to incant in any case—but he *did* still have some tempered aether stored up.

Arcus came so close he was almost clinging to Dyssea’s armor, shifted that tempered aether into his right arm, and pressed his fist against his opponent’s body.

The word “self-destruction” sprang to mind.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Take this!”

No sooner were the words out of Arcus’s mouth than there was a bang.



The tempered aether exploded right against Dyssea's chest. A fist-shaped dent appeared in his armor, and the impact reverberated through his entire body with an earth-shaking tremor.

"Guh!"

"Aargh!"

A paralyzing heat took hold of Arcus's fist as pain shot through his arm. Of all the attacks using tempered aether he'd devised, this was his most powerful, but because it involved making direct contact with his target, it came with direct recoil damage. Arcus had prepared himself as best he could, but it wasn't enough to completely counteract the pain. While his fist didn't seem broken, it would be some time before he could move it again.

Blood trickled from one corner of Dyssea's mouth; Arcus's attack must have wounded his organs. Suddenly, there was a flash of light from behind, and a white smoke rose up around them.

"I'll cast. White smoke."

Dyssea jumped back as though trying to escape it.

"Dyssea will avoid. Step away."

Arcus used the smoke as cover to fall back to Ceylan's side.

"Then use black pebbles!"

The full meaning of Ceylan's order hit him, and Arcus was propelled into action.

"Neverending, penetrating, torrent of evil. The dark blinking of soapberry and its crimson tide after the downpour. It runs and turns according to nature's will. Heat never cool, and know not your target. Pierce the soldiers' ears and drown out their battle cries. Run an incessant rampage."

"Now, Arcus! Fire with everything you have!"

Those words were in line with Ceylan's order, and the next second, the smoke in front of them was gone.

"Spinning Barrel."

Arcus's earlier attack meant he couldn't use his right fist, but his left still functioned just fine. He thrust his left arm through the magic circles and got down on one knee. When he readied his arm and hand, the circles shrank until they were a perfect fit, and then began to revolve in opposite directions.

These imperial soldiers had never seen this attack, so Arcus's movements must have looked very curious to them. They were used to fire flying or wind wailing mere seconds after an incantation. This was something different, and it was sure to catch them off guard.

The soldiers were waiting to see if they could work out what was coming, their movements a little uncertain—but Dyssea proved more perceptive.

"D-Dodge! *Dodge*, dammit!" His cry came a fraction of a second faster than the volley.

Arcus fired across in a straight line to cut off any immediate escape routes, but the remaining soldiers were shrewd. They dodged the projectiles and knocked them down with their swords. Dyssea managed to do the same, even after taking Arcus's punch. When they said he was a powerful warrior, they weren't exaggerating.

If Spinning Barrel launched at the same speed as real bullets, countering them like that would be impossible, but unlike Black Ammo, these projectiles were visible. In this world, where humans possessed exceptional physical prowess, apparently cutting down the attack was quite feasible. It made Arcus realize that he had found himself in a frightening world indeed.

Some soldiers failed to dodge in time; their bodies were torn apart by the black stones. Flesh went flying and blood spurted into the air, creating a vision of hell.

Arcus's left arm throbbed red with heat, screaming out in pain. If he went any further, he would reach his limit. He didn't *want* to stop now, but he had no choice.

"Tch."

Worried about scorching his arm, Arcus held back on his desire to keep shooting. Following his volition, the magic circles around his arm slowed before

eventually coming to a complete stop. The projectiles stopped, leaving nothing but an echo and the smell of gun smoke.

The magic circles stayed affixed to Arcus's arm; his spell was still active, but Dyssea Lubanka was also still alive. Aside from him, there were still more than ten enemy soldiers left.

"You still had magic like that up your sleeve..."

Arcus could only grunt in response.

"But it looks to me like you're done shooting."

It would be some time before the heat in Arcus's arm settled; that much was obvious to enemies of this caliber.

Dyssea took up his sword and charged.

If Arcus did nothing, he was dead.

His body wasn't moving properly, as though the heat in his arm was sapping his strength. He could try crawling, but Dyssea would catch up with him in no time. Not just Dyssea, but the other soldiers moving with him.

Just then, Arcus caught sight of movement in the corner of his eye.

"Just try it!"

A well-aimed slash from Ceylan's sword repelled Dyssea's. Dyssea was forced backwards from the unexpected blow.

"You'd risk your life for *him*?!"

"I certainly would! For Arcus is my retainer!"

"For a commander to cover for his subordinate is pure folly! Such an act makes you unfit to be king! Our very target is *your* head!"

"I am aware of that! However, I... I..." Ceylan didn't finish his sentence, but it was clear what he thought as he stood between Dyssea and Arcus.

His actions flew in the face of logic, and Arcus didn't know the meaning behind them, but still Ceylan moved to fight off Dyssea and the other soldiers.

The soldiers' sword technique was boorish and formulaic, and Ceylan warded

them off with elegant traditional moves. He fought off three opponents at once with ease. One soldier came close to a fatal blow, but Ceylan knocked him back with the same technique that had sent an enemy soldier flying earlier. As this enemy suffered the same fate, Dyssea took the chance to step in and take his shot.

“Ngh!” Ceylan intercepted the blow with the edge of his sword, but he couldn’t completely repel it. He struggled under Dyssea’s herculean strength, pulled into a sword-lock that he seemed destined to lose.

“Just give up already! Why can’t you understand that your resistance is meaningless?!”

“Gnngh...”

“As long as the Empire has its sights set on the kingdom, it is destined to flounder yet more desperately under your rule! When you resist like this, you are passing suffering unto your people!”

Ceylan grunted again, but gave no verbal response.

“The day the Empire crushes the kingdom is inevitable! So why not just give in now and—”

“...ence.”

“What?”

“I said, *silence!*” Ceylan shouted, allowing his voice to give strength to his movements. His sword pushed Dyssea’s upwards, forcing it back.

“Wh-What did you...”

“I will not lose! Even if the Empire threatens the kingdom; even if the kingdom faces a harrowing path ahead!” Ceylan poured his heart out to the astonished commander, whose surprise was plastered all over his face. “If the kingdom is destroyed, then I can already guess the transgressions your Empire will commit against my people! You will take everything! Your Empire, which only knows wealth from exploiting other nations and bleeding them dry, will reduce the kingdom to a vassal state. *You* should understand what that means!”

Dyssea was speechless.

“That is why I must protect my kingdom! The security which affords them their smiles! I will not allow them to face injustice and shed tears! I will live, and return home, inherit my father’s lot, and create a kingdom of power!”

His determination to protect rang clear through Ceylan’s words. Those words were all Arcus needed to steel his own resolve.

Arcus was going to protect Ceylan. He *had* to protect him. There was merit in fulfilling Ceylan’s deep-seated wish, even if it meant shoving aside his own desires.

There was much Arcus still needed to do for himself; his small-minded goal of getting back at his parents, while not an entirely positive motive, had driven Arcus forward all this time. It was that indignation that helped him to keep going when he was flagging. That rage which helped him stand up when exhaustion pushed him down.

How could his own meager wish take precedence over Ceylan’s?

Ceylan had declared his desire to protect the smiles of his people and to prevent them from shedding a tear. That heartfelt wish, the wish to protect someone, shone far more brightly than Arcus’s own—and perhaps that was how it should be. Because Ceylan’s desire was something that should garner respect from anybody.

Arcus’s spell was still in effect. All he needed was the will. A will sturdy as steel, strong enough to bear the pain that meant sacrificing his arm.

“Sir! Get back!”

“Arcus?!”

“Back! Hurry!”

Trusting that Ceylan would move quickly enough, Arcus readied his arm and began launching a fresh volley before the prince had moved out of the way.

“Gooooooooooooooooo!” he screamed as the projectiles went flying.

There were ten soldiers left, including Dyssea. This time, Arcus wasn’t prepared to stop until they were all down. He had to defeat them all, even if he needed to switch arms to do it. Because he needed to protect Ceylan’s wish.

His left arm grew hotter and redder. It was starting to steam from all the magic he was forcing it to process, and it was slowly, slowly being overtaken by a scorching sensation.

“Guaaaaaaaaaargh!”

“Arcus?! Don’t push yourself! Stop! Your arm will break! Arcus!”

Arcus heard Ceylan’s warning, but he couldn’t stop.

Soon after, he heard the soldiers’ intermittent screams. The clouds of dust his assault had kicked up left it impossible to gauge how many he’d dropped.

Arcus’s focus soon ran dry, putting an end to Spinning Barrel’s volley. The dust cleared, revealing several soldiers left standing: Dyssea and a handful of his subordinates—but they were not without injury. There were punctures in their bodies where they’d failed to dodge the bullets. Yet they still stood with their longswords ready to strike, their hostility unwavering. They must have possessed a remarkable conviction. Ceylan seemed just as curious about the nature of that conviction as Arcus.

“Dyssea Lubanka. I have a question for you. Why do you continue to fight? The Empire destroyed your native land. By all rights you should loathe them. What is your reason for seeking victory for the Emperor?”

Dyssea scoffed. “‘Why’? What a curious thing to ask.”

“How so?”

“The Empire’s soldiers fight because it is His Imperial Majesty’s will. If we don’t,” Dyssea paused, “that *viper* will destroy everything we hold dear.”

His words were heavy, but it was their eeriness that was more striking. Ceylan fell silent as he studied Dyssea. Arcus couldn’t help but wonder what sort of gaze hid behind that veil in that moment.

“We resisted the Empire’s invasions for a long, long time, but eventually their might proved too much and we were conquered. Before long, we became an imperial vanguard. We had no choice. My family’s only means of survival was to serve the Empire.” Dyssea’s face twisted into a ghastly glower. “Listen well, Ceylan Crosellode. The Empire has countless soldiers just like me. And it always

will, as long as Lainur persists in blocking our path to supremacy. One day we will destroy the kingdom. And we will bury you.”

Ceylan took a step backwards, overcome by Dyssea’s drive for a split second. His words held the weight of a man with a family, a man upon whom many lives depended.

But Arcus couldn’t stay silent in the face of such absurdity.

“That sounds like it’s gonna be a pain.”

“You! You’re still—”

“I’m still up. Because there are still enemies left to fight.”

“Arcus...”

His body still protested, but after a deep breath, Arcus began to speak.

“You’re free to go after His Royal Highness if you want. But the kingdom’s full of people just like me and the Royal Guard who would die to protect him. You want to bury him? Go ahead and try, if you think you can—but I’m gonna kill you, and everyone like you.”

“You’ve got guts, pipsqueak, I’ll give you that. But...”

Footsteps sounded from the trees. Arcus doubted they were allies, and he was proved right when more than ten extra imperial soldiers appeared.

Dyssea smirked. “It looks like your luck’s run out.”

“Dammit! This must be why Tribe was acting funny!”

“They still had reinforcements?” Ceylan clicked his tongue.

“Time to meet your end, Ceylan Crosellode!”

It looked like things were really over this time. Arcus was just moments from letting despair overtake him.

“Don’t be too hasty. Arcus and the prince are not your only opponents.”

The wind carried a familiar voice to them, and soon a single shadow appeared among the trees across from the imperial soldiers. It was a man with a slender face, wearing a black knitted hat and a cloak.

“Eido!” Dyssea yelled. “Are you here to stand in our way?!”

“You turned on us first. I don’t think you have any right to complain if I do.”

“You are after the prince too, aren’t you?!”

“Yes. I’ll take him once I’ve dealt with you. I need him to lure out that man, after all.”

“So you’re fighting us for him? You underestimate us. You really think you can take us alone?”

“‘All’ of you? I don’t see that many.”

“You’ll regret talking big when—” Before Dyssea could finish, Eido released some of the aether in his body. “Wh—”

It was powerful enough to whip up the air into a vortex around them. It rivaled even Craib’s aether for pure power and volume and *far* outclassed its intimidation factor. It blotted out the sky, dark as Eido’s own bleak will.

Eido’s spell sounded to be of his own making.

“Beginning and end of a dream. A declining future. The lives lost are countless. The vestiges of fighters appear from deep underground. Fighters, let your war cries resound. Fighters, conceal the shadows of war. Hold your swords up high. Hold your spears beside. Shadows arise and join our voices as we chant war.”

“Immortal Battalion.”

Artglyphs spread across the ground, giving way to silhouettes of soldiers rising up from the ground like clay dolls crawling out of a marsh. They numbered in the hundreds—the vanguard with its heavy armor, archers bearing sturdy bows, cavaliers akin to the Black Panther Cavalry’s own; soldiers of all kinds were gathered behind Eido.

“Wh-What is this?”

“Impossible.”

“*This* is magic?”

It wasn’t just the imperial soldiers letting out gasps of surprise. The royal guards who were still conscious murmured at the sight of Eido’s magic, as

anyone would. Knowing precisely what was within the domain of a magician's art did nothing to abate the transparent awe and terror they felt seeing a true master at work.

Dyssea's eyes widened too. "Eido, you..."

"I'm surprised that you were under the impression your numbers would help you. Have you forgotten that I used to stand equal to Shinlu Crosellode and his companions?"

Dyssea gritted his teeth.

"So many false assumptions running riot. You thought Crosellode would succumb to such an obvious snare? Ceylan Crosellode and those with him are not as soft as you seem to think, and Shinlu's power easily outstrips *this*. This boy is not one you can beat with mortal trickery."

"Then what about you?!" Dyssea demanded.

"I am no match for him either," Eido replied. "But I never said I wasn't stubborn."

Arcus understood that to mean that even if he couldn't win, at least he could put up a fight against Ceylan. He could exchange blows.

Dyssea began to grind his teeth, but Eido's voice rang out before the commander could open his mouth to give his next order.

"Charge."

His Immortal Battalion sprang into action. The shadowy warriors, darker still than the Black Panther Cavalry, charged into the fray. The Cavalry's annihilation was now only a matter of time.

"No! We haven't lost yet!" Dyssea turned and rushed toward Arcus and Ceylan, clearly down to the last trick in his arsenal.

He was after Ceylan's head. Knowing that, Arcus lifted his still-functioning right hand into the air.

"Jet-black wings glitter in the night. Your allies are black iron, as are your enemies. The flapping of those wings causes no sound, scattering iron sand up high, high into the sky. Tired of eating leaves, unsatisfied by cherries. Lend me

metal tools. Feed me iron. You call for iron, a butterfly sustained by metal tools."

Black Ammo required support from his left hand. Dwarf Star risked catching both Ceylan and himself in the blast. There was just a little too much distance between them for Evil Exasperation. This was the most surefire method to defeat Dyssea.

I don't have to be the one to actually kill him.

It was a similar situation to before, with the water and the electrical current. Arcus was simply setting the stage for the one who *could* defeat this man.

"That's all my aether! Take his weapons—Magnetic Butterfly!"

"M-My sword!" Dyssea grunted.

Dyssea's sword was drawn into the air by the powerful magnetic field emitted by the butterfly. Dyssea tried to keep hold of his weapon, but it was no use; the sword lifted him bodily from the ground, and he was forced to let go.

Ceylan's sword was also in range of the magnetic force; it too left his grip.

"Well done, Arcus."

Dyssea let out a roar, filled with a hatred so deep it was as though he had pulled it from the very depths of the earth. "You damned *brat!*"

"It appears Arcus has outwitted you, Dyssea, the Hardy Knight."

"But *you* have lost your weapon as well!"

Ceylan let out a curt laugh before declaring boldly, "I am Ceylan Crosellode. I cannot lose to you in a one-on-one fight, with or without my weapon."

"What?!"

Ceylan closed the distance between him and Dyssea, his footsteps breaking the earth beneath him. He then lunged squarely at Dyssea with nothing but his fist. The strike hit its mark perfectly.

"Impossible... I can't... Not after coming all this way..."

The impact sent Dyssea flying like a rubber ball caught in the path of an oncoming truck. He lay convulsing and spitting up blood, until eventually he was still.

“That was incredible, sir!”

“Perhaps. However...”

The remaining imperial soldiers had been overrun by Eido’s Immortal Battalion—but Eido himself was still present. Arcus and Ceylan’s only saving grace was that he wasn’t able to maintain his magic. The shadowy soldiers were dissolving away, one after the other.

Eido turned back to Ceylan. “Prince. Take up your sword.”

“Very well.”

Eido seemed to have decided he was finished using magic. He unsheathed the sword from his hip and faced Ceylan squarely.

“Eido!”

“Arcus. Stay quiet. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Wait! Just listen! You’re—”

“Arcus. Leave it.”

“Sir?”

“Leave it,” Ceylan said again, before picking his sword up from the ground and standing opposite Eido.

Arcus knew Ceylan wanted to clear up Eido’s misapprehension as much as he did, but the prince evidently intended to cross swords with him despite that.

Once, then twice, their swords clashed. Ceylan held his own against Eido despite his opponent’s size advantage. More than that, he was starting to overpower the man. Eido’s own movements were stiff and somewhat awkward. From what Arcus had seen before, he should have been nimbler than this.

“Eido, are you injured?”

“So what if I am?”

“That spell you used...”

Using so much of his power already must have exhausted him. If so, Arcus had only one course of action.

“Stop this, Eido!”

“I told you I don’t want to hear it! I...I have to do this! I need to pay that man back for betraying me!” Eido shouted back.

That shout came from the depths of his heart. A shout comprising all the suffering and anguish that had built up within him over the years. Ceylan readied his sword in response. He held it in his right hand while brandishing his index and middle fingers on his left.

“Come. I am ready for your sword.”

With another roar, Eido slashed at Ceylan—but his exhaustion and injury made his blade fall short. Ceylan repelled the attack, sweeping the sword away with his own. As Eido recovered, Ceylan launched two strikes with all the strength he could muster. His blade slammed hard against the side of Eido’s, sending Eido hurtling back.

He grunted. “I came eager to fight, but it seems things aren’t going my way.” Eido appeared to have realized he had no chance of winning. He scoffed and sank to the floor.

“Why did you not simply command your conjured troops to attack us as well?” Ceylan asked.

“I need you alive to lure out Shinlu Crosellode. That’s all there is to it.”

“You could have immobilized me without killing me.”

“I’m not scummy enough to do something like that after what I witnessed,” Eido said, referring to the exchange between Ceylan and Dyssea.

All of a sudden, Ceylan sheathed his sword.

“What’s the matter, Ceylan Crosellode? Why not kill me?”

“It is not necessary.”

“What?”

“Eido, listen to us,” Arcus said. “His Majesty attacked you and your men in order to save you.”

Eido frowned dubiously and turned his gaze to Ceylan. “Ceylan Crosellode.

Can you explain?"

"Father told me everything. In order to save your lives, it was necessary to drive you from the capital."

"If that's true, why did Shinlu Crosellode kill my subordinates?" Eido waited for a response, but none came. "You can't answer that?"

"Father did not tell me that much. However, I might be able to guess."

"Go on."

"I believe it was possibly because he wanted to rid you of plants."

"Plants? Were there plants among my men?"

"My father said that the government at the time needed to do away with all the ruffians who lurked in the darker parts of the capital. To produce tangible results, the noble classes wanted a sacrificial scapegoat. They narrowed the options down to the two vigilante groups of the city. One was the group my father led, and the other was yours."

"Yes. I know that much."

"Father's group boasted a handful of noble children, so they could not be touched. That was the reason your group was singled out. They then sent their subordinates among your men in order to solidify your guilt. You must have realized it. Those whom my father killed were not your acquaintances of old, but those who had joined recently."

"I see. That explains it."

"It seems you were aware of something more to this."

"You're right. Everyone who was killed that day were people who had joined me within the year the trouble with the authorities started."

"My father must have given the order to kill because they were parasites that were devouring your group from the inside."

"If that's true, why didn't he say anything?"

"If he had, you would have remained in the capital to assist him. You would have gone after the nobles and officials attempting to set you up. My father

would not have been able to protect you. That is why he had no choice but to drive you out.”

Eido stayed silent, apparently finding it difficult to accept everything he’d been told.

“Eido. Surely you are satisfied with this explanation?”

“How can I be, after all this time?”

“Father drove you from the capital because he wanted you to live. As his son, it is beyond me to do anything that might defy his feelings.” Ceylan stepped up to Eido and stretched out his hand. “If you doubt what I have told you, then come with me. Stand before my father and ask him for the truth.”

“I attacked you. You’re willing to take your attacker to see your father?”

“Attacker? How curious that you should say such a thing. You did not attack us; in fact, you pulled us from our predicament.”

“But we fought.”

“I said I was ready for your sword. I invited it; you were merely following my instructions.”

“Your father liked to play with semantics too,” Eido muttered.

“Did he now?” Ceylan let out a laugh before continuing with a more serious tone. “My father was admired by many who were inspired to follow him—Crucible and Stronghold, just for starters. I would wager you were fond of my father as they were, Eido. Else you would not have held such a grudge to this very day.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“Then come with me. Take my hand. You have every right to.”

“I’m sorry,” Eido choked after a pause. His expression told of deep, unreadable emotion.

With this, there was no one left to threaten Arcus and Ceylan. It was over. They’d gotten through the ambush.

Or so Arcus thought.

“So you are the magician who broke through our Three-Walled Altar.”

A voice resounded from deep within the trees.

A voice rang out from the depths of the forest and stabbed through Arcus’s chest. The voice was pleasant and feminine, and laced with the vibrancy of youth. Ceylan and Arcus watched the trees it came from, where a languid white mist emanated from the murky darkness. The color eventually solidified into that of white porcelain before taking the shape of a person’s face. Either that mist was an illusion, or that bodiless face was a spiritual projection of some kind. As the outline of a mask became clear, an uncovered mouth formed beneath it, along with a feminine body enveloped in an indigo robe. It was like a ghost that had taken on color and shape.



The masked figure seemed to peel away from the darkness of its backdrop before weaving through the undergrowth, standing before Ceylan, and bowing.

“A pleasure to meet Your Royal Highness, Prince of Lainur, Ceylan Crosellode. My name is Aluas. Please refer to me as Aluas, the Immortal.”

Ceylan’s tone was sharp as he responded. “I’d ask you to stop fooling around. An introduction such as yours lacks even basic etiquette. This situation calls for more than simply telling me your name.”

“I humbly beg for forgiveness. I am not of noble birth, so please be merciful if I commit any transgressions,” Aluas responded coolly. Whether she was trying to be serious or not was unclear, but she certainly seemed the easygoing type.

Ceylan snorted before promptly fixing up his aura to be more imposing. Arcus felt as though an invisible force were crushing his organs, but it barely seemed to affect Aluas at all. Even in the face of such an oppressive aura, the mouth underneath her mask curled into a smirk.

“Are you of the Empire as well?”

“That I should be present here should make that much obvious.”

Her phrasing was needlessly meandering for what she claimed was an obvious fact, nor did she mention the Empire by name. Her timing was strange too—enough that Arcus could only assume she belonged to a different faction. Aluas’s eyes left Ceylan’s face for a split second to flick in Arcus’s direction.

“You are Arcus, aren’t you?”

“How do you know my name?”

“Because I’ve been watching this whole time.”

That meant she must have heard Arcus introduce himself earlier. That also meant she had been spectating on the fight without lifting a finger to support her allies. Arcus was sure now that she wasn’t from the Empire.

Just then, footsteps sounded from behind her: there had been more imperial soldiers hidden in the trees. They appeared one by one before spreading out to surround Arcus and Ceylan. They looked different from the Black Panther Cavalry, but they didn’t look like ordinary soldiers either. Arcus would expect

any imperial soldiers to attack Ceylan immediately in a situation like this, so as not to waste the precious opportunity. Instead, they surrounded the two boys and just stood there. Arcus couldn't make sense of it.

Arcus braced himself for a fight. Aluas turned to him, put an arm across her chest, and bowed deeply in the manner peculiar to the kingdom. It was a respectful gesture; one that revealed the sloppiness in her earlier bow to Ceylan.

"Arcus Raytheft. I watched every last spell you used in your fight against Dyssea. I have devoted myself to learning magic for a long, long time, and yet I have no knowledge of such spells. It was enough to put me to shame."

"Thanks."

"You don't sound particularly grateful."

"Hmph."

Aluas chuckled, her smile not fading as she carried on. "How noble of you. I can only imagine how hard it is to keep your cool at a time like this."

Finally it seemed like she had finished giving compliments, and was now ready to move on to the topic at hand.

"I have something to ask of you. It concerns the spell you used to break through the Three-Walled Altar used earlier on the battlefield. Would you mind telling me what that was?"

This "Three-Walled Altar" was probably the defensive spell the imperial magicians had used. Aluas seemed to have confirmed that Spinning Barrel was the spell Arcus had used to breach it, so there wouldn't be much point in feigning ignorance.

"I'm not gonna tell you, and I don't think you thought I would."

"I didn't, no. But I'm afraid I can't go home empty-handed."

"What are you gonna do then?"

"Let's see. How about I let Ceylan go in exchange for you telling me about your spell?"

Arcus's breath caught in his throat at her condition. It had unsettled him, as she likely knew it would. The threat of losing Ceylan was a danger to the entire kingdom. That was why her offer didn't seem too egregious, and Arcus was tempted to accept it.

"We cannot agree to that."

"Sir..."

"You said that you would let *me* go. You mentioned nothing of my royal guard, nor, crucially, Arcus himself."

"Why would I? I'd have no excuses for letting your guard go, and I need Arcus to come with me to share the secrets about his spell."

"And that is exactly why we cannot agree to your conditions," Ceylan concluded.

Aluas's lip curled into a suggestive smile. "Do your objections have something to do with the device for measuring aether?"

"I'm not sure what you might be referring to."

"I won't mind if you stop feigning ignorance, Your Royal Highness. We already know of that device's existence." Aluas chuckled. "Although we've yet to get our hands on one."

"How dare you?"

An abrasive hostility flared in Ceylan's aura. That invisible force sharpened into a single wicked point but still Aluas seemed unaffected by it. In fact, her voice took on a more spirited tone as she spoke again.

"He's the one who made the device in question. Watching that fight just now confirmed it. The magician, Arcus Raytheft. There is some mechanism behind your magic which outstrips this world's grasp of it. It is... Yes. It is something unnatural, as though you came from far into the future—no. As if you have experienced the distant past."

Arcus didn't respond.

"It is truly wonderful. But that gift, that knowledge, must not be confined to a single magician of a single nation. So allow me to invite you to our Silver Heralds

of the Dawn.”

She’d moved past the impossible task of negotiating and was now out to solicit him. But Arcus only had one answer for her.

“I won’t. The path in front of me was already set just a small while ago.”

“Is that right? A pity; I was hoping I wouldn’t have to use force.”

“It’s a fight then?”

“Think of it as thanks for allowing me to witness your magic. I’ll show you some of mine now,” Aluas said, before launching into an incantation.

“I ask for [REDACTED] for the whereabouts of the [REDACTED] blaze. Footprints, forgotten and buried by the flow of time. Here, a [REDACTED] dreams of resurrection. Spin from the wisdom of [REDACTED]. Dreamy [REDACTED] become an unstoppable [REDACTED] and cry out.”

“[REDACTED]”

Bright red, sparkling Artglyphs scattered out from in front of Aluas, burning as they formed a vast magical circle before her. The air in the center of the circle wavered and flickered like a burning photograph.

A huge fiery bird appeared from inside that wavering circle. It flew out, its wings whipping up a powerful wind, a shock wave bursting out before it. It flew straight backwards, drawing a stream of fire behind it. Arcus threw himself down, the only way he could avoid being blown away by that wind, as the forest disappeared into flame. He turned back to see that the smoldering path and the forest itself had been ripped apart by fire.

He’d heard the incantation. Most of it, at least. Aluas hadn’t done everything she could have in order to obfuscate it.

This spell...

Though Arcus compared it to his deep knowledge of the Chronicles and the other spells he’d heard, he couldn’t come up with a source for it. There was still much of the Chronicles that hadn’t been deciphered, but he still had as many details as possible logged in his brain. Yet he couldn’t find anything close to the spell he’d just heard.

Part of it might have been that she used words and phrases he'd never encountered before, but more than that, its power had been enough to tear up old growth by its roots and scatter it. Her use of the word "blaze" didn't feel like enough to explain the spell's raw output. He could only think that the spell was based on a part of the Chronicles that hadn't been deciphered yet.

Ceylan squatted down to whisper in Arcus's ear.

"Arcus. Have you got any aether left?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Barely any."

"That cannot be helped."

Perhaps not. But it only left them with one choice.

"Sir. Please flee."

"Do not be ridiculous. I am Ceylan Crosellode. I will not turn my back to an enemy amounting to little more than a common soldier."

"But she's an exceptionally powerful magician. I worry for you, sir."

"I agree there is something curious about her. However, I cannot simply flee and leave everyone."

"I can't even move my left arm. I'm a liability."

"Exactly why I cannot flee. How can I hope to protect my new royal lineage when I cannot protect my own retainer?"

"But sir—"

"I am fully aware of my own foolishness in this matter. But I shall not flee."

Eido stood up then to stand between Aluas and the boys. "Don't forget about me now."

"Eido. You must go and see my father."

"And how can I, if it means leaving you here to die?"

"Ugh..." Ceylan grumbled.

Aluas let out a short laugh. "Are you all done talking?"

"Come now. You don't expect us to cater to your every whim, do you?"

Ceylan took up a defensive stance, streams of lightning crackling around his body.

He was ready to fight with everything he had. His aether began to churn, creating an illusion that he was standing beneath a storm. Ceylan's guards began to move too, determined to protect him this time. As long as they could do *something* to hinder the enemy, perhaps Ceylan would find an opportunity to defeat the imperial soldiers. If they could just secure Ceylan the time to incant, victory would be his.

For his part, Arcus gathered all the tempered aether he had remaining into his right fist to wait for the right time to use it. Ceylan began to murmur, and then Aluas raised her hand. Arcus knew the enemy soldiers would move the moment she lowered it. But suddenly, a powerful shock wave came flying in from the highway beside them.

"Wh—"

"What's happening?"

Trees warped as they struggled to stay rooted against the burst of wind. One of the soldiers who had been sealing off the highway suddenly let out a strained scream.

"Run!"

His roar was as explosive as the blast itself, as though disaster were unfolding before his very eyes. The next second, the trees around them burst into flame. The fire spread from tree to tree like it was so much prairie grass, and soon everything was enveloped in a blaze. Everything had turned red before anyone had time to blink.

Before Arcus had time to work out who cast the spell and from where, a thick fluid like lava began to flow in from along the road. It moved like white-crested waves, eroding the beach before them. The fluid's surface turned black and crumbled where the air oxidized it.

"Th-Th-The Red Tsunami!"

The imperial soldiers let out cries of despair. It was no wonder; this was a calamity that no man could stand up to. The terrifying speed at which it surged

on inspired enough dread to tear a heart in two, and Arcus would have felt the same way even if he was only watching a movie of the event. That this was reality made it all the more severe.

Its true nature was molten iron. Burning red-hot and limned with scarlet, its heat and light enough to scorch any observer's eyes. The way it crackled told of its ability to scorch skin.

The molten iron encroached on the imperial soldiers like waves, swallowed them up, and then hardened and turned black as it cooled instantly. White smoke rose up from the iron statues. Crooked Artglyphs, the residue of the spell, dissolved into the air.

"Incredible..." Ceylan gasped, joy coloring his tone.

"You came."

Aluas clicked her tongue. "From *The Birth of Heaven and Earth*. 'The Red Tsunami, flowing forth. Jetting out from the earth, it took the form of that vast land's backbone, the Iron Mountains.' One of the Ten Fables which depict the phenomena that gave shape to our world and the heavens above."

The first Ancient Chronicle, *The Birth of Heaven and Earth*, told of several phenomena which led to this world's creation. The Light of the Heavens. The Freezing Fires. Vaha's Vortex. Legaia, the Bituminous Giant. There were more, but among them, the Red Tsunami was said to have formed the Cross Mountain Range which ran across the continent. And it was one of the kingdom's state magicians, said to be the third-highest, who favored magic based on that phenomenon.

"You didn't make it hard to find you, huh? Thanks a bunch."

A familiar voice spoke out from across the path. Arcus turned at the sound of it. There stood a figure he knew well, standing atop a cooled outcrop of black iron in the center of the red stream.

"Oh..." He let out a gasp, a mixture of relief and joy.

The magician casually held out a cigar. The molten iron rose up to light its tip. He took a deep puff before letting a large cloud of smoke out into the air.

Ceylan's own voice was soft with relief as he spoke the magician's name.
"Crucible."

Crucible: that was what the kingdom called the magician whose combat boots clicked across the cold iron. His real name was Craib Abend.

He was a big, muscular man, whose aether overflowed and surrounded his body. He stood with his arms folded, and a military coat hung across his shoulders. Although his movements were disciplined and sharp, he still held that large, lit cigar between his teeth.

A soldier who had escaped the molten iron launched himself across the hardened metal to attack. Craib watched them calmly, slowly pulled the cigar from his mouth, and flicked it toward him.

"Guh!"

"Pathetic." Craib sighed and dealt a backhanded blow to the approaching soldier, who'd flinched.

To say it looked like it hurt was an understatement. The soldier's body was crushed as though he'd been hit by a literal iron fist, and then swallowed up and taken away by the waves of molten metal.

"Uncle."

Craib turned to Arcus and gave a quick nod, before racing up to Ceylan and taking a knee.

"Crucible, State Magician Craib Abend. I am here at Your Royal Highness's request."

"You have done well to come here, Crucible."

"Sir. Please leave the rest of this to me."

"As you wish. Take care of it."

Arcus suddenly felt his body being lifted up into the air, as though somebody was helping him up. He raised his head to see a familiar face.

"Master Arcus."

"Noah."

It was his servant supporting his body. He was likely the one who had led Craib here.

A group of magicians appeared behind Craib: his own magical troops. They cast spells to bring the temperature down, allowing them to spread out on iron platforms themselves. A portion of them moved to surround Aluas, while others went to aid Ceylan's royal guard. Meanwhile, Craib cast his gaze over the terrain, and when he had a good reading of the situation, he grinned smugly at his nephew.

"Arcus! Attaboy! Looks like you showed some real guts!"

Arcus could only let out a flat laugh from his position in Noah's arms and stick a fist in the air in response. Never had he felt so elated at his uncle's praise.

"But..." Craib turned his gaze to Eido. "Looks like you picked up some familiar company."

"Funny you should say that; I never expected you to show up either."

"Whaddya doin' here then? Thought you'd disappeared ages ago."

"Good question. Why not ask someone else?"

"Guess I might. As long as you're not the enemy here, it's all good."

Eido's gaze suddenly softened, like he was reminiscing. "You've changed."

"Yeah?"

"You used to be a lot more miserable."

"Keep it to yourself. I'm not here to talk about my tales on the run from home, got it?"

They turned their attention back to Aluas, who spoke next.

"It looks to me like Shinlu Crosellode outmaneuvered our general."

"Course he did. You don't think the kingdom's really *that* far behind the Empire, do you?" Craib said, before forming his aura into a burning wind that blew toward her. Finally, Aluas seemed to feel a sense of urgency.

"I suppose there's not much I can do anymore, so I will retreat."

“You think we’ll let you?”

“You will.” With those words, Aluas leaped up away from the sea of iron and landed in a tree that had survived the tsunami.

The waves of molten iron swept over where she had just stood, and Craib instantly sent them up into the air. Once cast, Craib could manipulate his Iron Tsunami freely until either his aether ran out, or he cut off his aether’s supply. It wasn’t just simple movement either; he could cool and harden it, turn it back into bubbling liquid iron, and even send it reaching up into the sky like he was now.

As the molten iron chased her, Aluas spoke another incantation, which resulted in a defensive spell in front of her. The iron tentacles that had formed were repelled by a translucent wall.

“Looks like you’re pretty tough.”

“It is an honor to be praised by somebody capable of manipulating one of the forces of creation.”

“You’re not sayin’ you’re better than someone like that ’cause you managed to repel my magic, are you?”

“You’re reading too much into my words. I did little more than repel the small part of the spell sent my way.”

“Heh.” Craib snorted, closed one eye, and quickly raised his right hand overhead.

At his signal, the iron spread out over the area even further and, like a waterfall in reverse, stretched upwards until it was taller than the trees. It was a sight fit to fill even his allies with dread. But just before that tremendous mass could attack Aluas, her figure blurred and flickered. The rush of molten iron seemed to make contact—but it passed right through her.

“What?!” Craib narrowed his eyes.

It should have been a direct hit, but Aluas was floating there, unaffected, just an image hanging in the air. How had she done it? It didn’t look like she’d used any sort of spell.

Having secured her safety, Aluas's voice was calm when she spoke again. "I never expected the kingdom's side to do as much damage to us as they have. Porque Nadar, our decoy. General Bague Gruba. Dyssea Lubanka and his ambush. And finally, me. We had everything. A plan, and as much fighting force as we needed. Yet you held your own against every last component."

"Naturally. Because you underestimated Lainur."

"We underestimated nothing, else our planning wouldn't have been so scrupulous."

The question of the real reason behind their failure was not one which needed to be asked, for its answer was incredibly simple.

"Of course we managed to hold our own," Arcus said.

"And why is that?" Aluas asked.

"Every part of your operation was pulling in a totally different direction. It doesn't matter how powerful your units are, they won't be able to make full use of that power if they're not synchronized with each other. Of course they're gonna get all tangled up if they're each just doing whatever they want."

Aluas didn't respond, so Arcus continued.

"You were all after victory; that much was a common goal between you all: Porque Nadar, that imperial commander who ambushed us, and you, whoever you are. But the second you all started slighting each other, your impending collapse became obvious. There's no way a bunch of people all thinking only of themselves can beat a united group like us."

"Oh, my. You might be right." Aluas's tone suddenly softened. "You broke through the Three-Walled Altar, and eliminated Dyssea. The way you speak makes me think you held a deep understanding of this conflict the entire time. In other words..."

Aluas paused.

"If we truly wanted to seize victory, we should have started by doing something about *you*."

Aluas's figure faded a little more. "Arcus Raytheft. Please remember my

earlier words. We will be waiting for your change of heart.”

“I wouldn’t bother,” Arcus spat.

Aluas merely smiled at him before vanishing like smoke. It looked like she was gone for good now—which meant it was all finally over.

Relief swept over Arcus, soon followed by a heavy darkness. His body hurt so much that he’d reached his limit.

“Master Arcus? Stay with us!” Noah was shaking him.

“Arcus! Hey, Arcus! Pull it together!” Craib’s voice was approaching.

“Arcus! Quick, we need healing magic!” Next was Eido.

“Arcus! *Arcus!*”

The final voice he heard before losing consciousness completely was Ceylan’s frantic cry.



Epilogue: A Dreamy Visitor

When Arcus came to, he was standing dazed and alone in an unfamiliar place.

“Huh?”

He studied his surroundings, his mind still foggy with sleep. He appeared to be standing on a path. It was narrow, barely wide enough for two adults to stand side by side. The light of the sun was far off in the sky and blocked out by a tall wall, making the path below Arcus seem more like a cramped, gloomy alleyway.

Wooden crates and cardboard boxes were piled up haphazardly, trash was piled up in corners, and the whole place was dusty. Worn outdoor units hung tick-like from shuttered windows. Maintenance ladders malingered in their places, rusty and in disrepair. When Arcus looked down, there was a black, muddy puddle beneath his feet, exposed wiring writhing around in it like snakes.

Where am I?

The last thing he remembered was Craib chasing off Aluas, and being held by Noah. There were no memories beyond that; nothing linking to his current situation. There was no way he had wandered off and gotten lost. In the first place, everything about where he was now was too...different.

The objects here were from the man's world.

Thinking about it wasn't getting him anywhere, so Arcus headed for the bright light at the end of the path in search of an answer. The light coming from the main road was so dazzling compared to the alley that Arcus had to shield his eyes. When his eyes had finally adjusted, he was greeted by a familiar scene spread out in front of him.

High-rise buildings of concrete and multicolored lights loomed over the street. Engines rattled as cars raced down the road, and trains clattered across elevated bridges in the distances. Below Arcus's feet was a tiled sidewalk, and past that an asphalt roadway.

This was definitely the man's world.

Which meant that Arcus might have been dreaming, and become that man once more. He checked his reflection in a storefront window, but he didn't see the man. He saw Arcus Raytheft.

"What's going on?"

If this was the same dream, he should have been the man. Why was he Arcus?

Still without an answer, he ambled down the sidewalk, until eventually he reached a crossing. There was a crowd of people there, waiting for the traffic light to turn green. Arcus tried to study their faces; he couldn't tell whether their features were actually nonexistent, or whether they were just hidden by shadows.

When the light eventually turned green, the faceless people traversed the white painted lines as one. Office workers, housewives, students; all of them. Like they were being pushed along by the current of an invisible river.

Arcus was wondering whether he should follow them when suddenly he caught sight of a familiar blueish-white, flickering light. It glimmered, floating between the people in the crowd. Its movements seemed confused, like a ball of flame that had wandered from the graveyard into modern society.

Without particularly thinking about it, Arcus walked up to it. He had the sense that he was like an insect being lured to a light trap, but it wasn't like he had anywhere else to go. When he approached, the figure holding up that inviting light became clear.

"This way!"

It was the Grave Sprite, Gown. A blue hood covered his face, leaving only his smiling yellow eyes visible. He was holding up a lantern much like Arcus's own, and beckoning him on eagerly. To see a creature so fantastical against a modern backdrop made Arcus feel like he was hallucinating. Or perhaps this was a vision he was seeing in his final moments.

"This way!" Gown beckoned again, slipping in between the bodies of the crowd.

Arcus followed and eventually caught up.

“Hello, Arcus!”

“Hi. You’re here to help me pass on, right? I sure didn’t live very long...”

“What? You’re not dead yet, Arcus!”

“Really? I could’ve sworn that’s what all this meant.” Arcus gestured to their surroundings.

“No,” Gown replied, shaking his head with an exasperated sigh.

That Arcus was wrong was actually somewhat of a relief.

“Has Tribe been a good doggy?”

“Of course. It’s helped me out a ton of times. I still don’t know what goes through its head sometimes though.”

“That’s normal. You still need time to get used to each other.”

Arcus was more concerned about whether Tribe had accepted him in the first place, never mind the fact that they weren’t “used” to each other, but he left the thought unspoken.

“Where are we exactly then?”

“Come this way.”

“Wait, tell me what’s going on first.”

“Come on!”

Gown was setting his own pace as usual. Arcus was a little relieved to see the Grave Sprite hadn’t changed, even if their surroundings remained a mystery.

Uneasiness continued to weigh on his chest as he followed Gown. They slipped through the crowds, between buildings, and under bridges, and approached a train station Arcus recognized. They carried on until they arrived at a tidy café, one you might find in any town. A large glass window in place of a wall made the inside clearly visible from the sidewalk. The uniform white wallpaper gave a sense of cleanliness and brightness to the interior, and the tables and chairs were made from wood. The terraced outdoor seating left a fashionable impression.

Arcus glanced at the terrace. Among the many faceless people sitting at the tables, there was one whose features were crystal-clear.

Huh?

It was a young girl; she looked to be in her mid-teens. She had flowing black hair and eyes so blue it was like there were glittering sapphires embedded within them. Her skin was white as snow and her lips a light, glossy pink. In fact, she looked more like an exquisite life-sized doll sitting there at the table. Something about her reminded Arcus a little of Sue, though he dismissed it as his imagination.

As for her clothing, she wore a white high-necked jacket and black pants. That alone was enough to give her appearance a futuristic feel, but Arcus was more interested in the chains that garnished every part of her body. There were so many of them hanging from her clothes, they'd probably clink against each other with every tiny movement. At a glance it looked as though she were bound, but there was nothing to suggest that they hindered her.

"I've done my job now! Have a good time, Arcus!"

"A good time? What?"

Gown waved at Arcus, his figure growing faint. And then he was gone, as though swallowed up by an invisible mist. Left in the lurch, Arcus felt his energy leave him.

The girl on the terrace smiled at him warmly. "Come, have a seat."

Her voice was gentle. It was almost *too* clear and smooth, which in turn made it faintly terrifying. Arcus stepped onto the terrace and took a seat in the wooden chair across from her.

"Are you the one who set this whole thing up?" he asked.

"Yes, exactly. I thought it better to have an acquaintance of yours lead you here than for me to go out and meet you myself."

"That's very kind of you. But everything else about this is kinda confusing."

The girl let out a modest laugh. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Chain. It is a pleasure to meet you, Arcus Raytheft."

“Chain?”

“Yes.”

Chain. She was a figure of legend known to everyone in the world Arcus called home: one of the Twin Phantoms from *The Spiritual Age*. A supernatural being, she and her elder sister Wedge traveled the then-chaotic world, pacifying it and setting it in order. On their travels, they defeated monsters, quelled calamities, and acted as leaders to the people. Their actions inspired a deep devotion in many, and it was a rare thing to pick up a fairy tale or picture book that didn't include them in some way.

“I didn't think I'd dream about someone so incredible.”

“Call it a dream, if you like; however, it is a little more than that.”

“What is it then?”

“Well, it may help to think of it as...a shared thought, taking shape as a dream. This is nothing so vague and obscure as the things you humans dream of—more of a universal mental space.”

“I dunno, that sounds kinda science-fictiony to me.”

“Perhaps, but I trust you will understand what I mean, for you have his memories and experiences.”

“‘His’?!”

Arcus followed Chain's gaze as she looked to the side. There was a round wooden table positioned in the sunlight, accompanied by two chairs. And there was that familiar man. The man from the other world who'd died far too young.

His intellect and physical abilities were exceptional. He read much and was well-versed in the martial arts, a genius who'd received many a blessing from the heavens. People expected much from him, but those expectations weren't enough to prevent his early demise.

He was there with his lover, talking and laughing about nothing in particular as they smiled gently at each other. Arcus could hardly imagine a more blissful scene. It must have taken place shortly after their engagement.

Their voices were filled with hope and joy, but hearing them speak like that

only filled Arcus with unease. While they excitedly discussed topics such as the venue and the guest list, Arcus could only think about the heartbreak that awaited the joyful pair.

All of a sudden, shadows fell upon the couple's faces. At first their expressions became diminished, like figures in a children's book, before disappearing and becoming just like the faces of all the other people walking past.

Chain passed Arcus a handkerchief. Only then did Arcus realize he was crying.

"What happened to Tsugaya after that?"

"You do not need to know that much. It would only distress you further."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess you're right."

Hearing that she had fallen into despair would fill Arcus with guilt. And if he heard she'd found herself a new man, that would be sad in its own way.

Arcus was not that man, but he had been him once. That was enough to fill his heart with sadness, so any more than that may well be unwarranted. After calming down a little, he spoke again.

"You said your name's Chain. Are you...*that* Chain?"

"Yes. I am indeed the Chain you are thinking of."

"Oh, um... I should have spoken more formally to you then, shouldn't I?"

"No, you may carry on as you were. I believe that would be easier on you."

"Um... Okay, well. I will, so please pardon my insolence."

"Of course." Chain smiled radiantly at him.

Arcus felt himself growing self-conscious, which he quickly disguised with a cough before moving on to his next question.

"So, this conversation is the same as if we were talking in real life, right?"

"That is correct. Oh, I am capable of speaking to you in the other world too, but we are a ways apart there; noospheric communion seemed the expedient option for the both of us."

In the man's world, gods and spirits existed only in stories, but in the other

world, they had a material presence. Despite belonging to that world, because of the man's influence, Arcus couldn't help but think of that aspect as fantastical.

"Why did you want to meet me?"

"I have a request to make of you."

"A request?"

"Yes. Before long, certain events described in *The Prophecy of Shadows* will come to pass. I would like you to prevent them."

"Wh... Huh?"

"That is all I have to say."

"W-Wait! Wait, you can't just leave things there!"

"There is no need for panic. Nothing has started yet; you have plenty of time."

"That's not the part I'm freaking out about!"

"I understand. It sounds a little overwhelming, doesn't it? You are having trouble processing everything."

"Yeah, that's exactly it..."

Chain laughed quietly. She was more mischievous than Arcus had expected.

"Please accept my apologies. However, we will be in great trouble should you turn down my request."

"I get it. Why did you pick me though? There are probably a ton of people who'd be a better fit for the job. I must be pretty far down the list."

"I am asking you precisely because you are you, Arcus Raytheft," Chain explained, her tone confident. Where that self-assurance came from, Arcus didn't know. But he had an inkling.

"Has it got anything to do with this?" Arcus looked around their surroundings and then glanced back at Chain.

This was the only reason he could think of. That she picked him because he had knowledge and experience of the man's life and this world.

“That is one reason, yes,” she answered without elaborating.

Arcus doubted she would give more information even if pushed, so he returned to the main topic. “You want me to change the outcome of these prophecies, right? Is that even possible?”

“It is not *impossible*. The *Prophecy of Shadows* is more of an indicator, or an approximation of what is to come, if you will. They are events which repeat for eternity, but the outcome can change each time. There have been several events in the past where the outcome has changed due to a focused effort.”

Arcus was satisfied. If one of the Phantoms was telling him it was possible, he had no reason to doubt it.

“What is your answer?”

“Well, if you’re telling me to do it, I can’t really refuse.”

He wasn’t a devout believer in the Phantoms or anything, but as an inhabitant of that world, he couldn’t pretend they didn’t exist either—especially when one was making a direct request of him.

“There’s other stuff I need to do too though,” Arcus said.

“You are free to work on your own goals whenever you have the time.”

“The time... Yeah...”

That was the problem. If a Phantom was involved in this situation, it probably wasn’t something that would afford him much free time at all.

“So what *exactly* am I supposed to do?”

“That is not for me to say.”

“If you don’t tell me what to do, how am I supposed to know? What am I dealing with? The resurrection of the Demon Kings from *Demons and Society’s Collapse*? Some huge monster? Or some crazy creature that humans can’t do anything about, like from *The Spiritual Age*?”

Chain spoke of him preventing something, which to Arcus sounded like she was talking about some huge disaster. The closest thing he could think of were the four Demon Kings from *Demons and Society’s Collapse*, the sixth Ancient

Chronicle. They were incredibly powerful beasts that attempted to destroy the world in the years following *The Magician's Elegy*. If they were to return, that event would surely be described in *The Prophecy of Shadows*.

Another possibility was dark spirits born from hex. They were said to be the direct cause of the breakdown of the magic civilization described in *The Magician's Elegy*. Back then, magic was hugely common, which resulted in the creation of vast amounts of hex. That created a storm of dark spirits and hex fiends to appear all over the world. Their numbers increased rapidly, threatening human civilization, resulting in great loss until the appearance of the Demon Kings.

Then there were the beasts described in *The Spiritual Age*, which differed from those spirits.

The giant wicked spirit that drank the entire ocean dry. The Crystal Queen who trapped humans she took a liking to in precious stone. Heartless tin soldiers who were said to create demons. The beast with one huge eye that changed everyone it looked at into black steel. The Headless Knight, who fought many a battle with The Mistletoe Knight, Floam.

These were all creatures that human beings couldn't hope to defeat. Arcus probed Chain for more, but when she spoke, her voice was curt.

"I would like you to read and judge for yourself, and then for you to prevent the danger accordingly."

"You won't help me?"

"The era in which spirits helped to solve humanity's problems is long since over."

"Hmm..."

Arcus almost wanted to call that irresponsible, but he couldn't. This was a creature that had protected the world long before he was born. If her role was over now, then not only would it be impudent to complain, but he should be grateful to her.

"This sounds like it's gonna be really tough," Arcus said.

Chain couldn't tell him anything more, nor would she help him. Not only was she asking a lot of him, but she was asking him to do it all alone, which would only make things more difficult. Chain seemed to sense his concerns.

"Let's see. I think I can tell you one thing that may prove useful."

"What's that?"

"You must seek an emerald."

"An emerald?"

"Correct. Should you find it, a new path will be opened to you."

"Okay..."

Her advice didn't ring any bells at all. An emerald would open a new path—what did that mean? A single gemstone in that world wouldn't be too difficult to find, but Arcus couldn't think by what mechanism it might "open a new path" for him.

"Be at ease. You will understand once you find it."

"You can't tell me any more details about this either?"

Chain shook her head with a gentle smile. "My business with you is done. Thank you for your help, Arcus Raytheft."

"Uh, I'll do what I can."

"That is enough for now. Farewell."

"Hngh..."

Suddenly, Arcus was struck by a wave of drowsiness. If he was already dreaming, this must have been a sign that he was waking up. Just before his consciousness faded, he heard a voice.

"Magician, Arcus Raytheft. May you have great encounters and form powerful bonds."

Her final blessing was fitting for the Phantom of Chains.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. It's been a while. This is the author, Gamei Hitsuji.

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of *The Magician Who Rose From Failure*, volume four. We've finally made it to the fourth volume, *and* the first volume of the manga is out! I couldn't be happier!

Looking at the word count alone, I've probably written around five to six volumes' worth. The bigger books can fit a lot of pages with a lot of words, making them pretty hefty. It's my intention to keep on threatening the shelf space of all my paperback readers. Sorry about that.

This volume follows on from the previous one, where Arcus and his companions get wrapped up in a war(!) after traveling to the west. I say "wrapped up," but maybe "participated" would be a more accurate description. It's difficult to say, since Arcus went in against his will, but at least the subheading "*Tales of War and Magic*" fits now.

While he's not exactly making strategy suggestions one after the other, Arcus makes use of the knowledge he's gained from the man's books in the war council, and economizes his limited aether on the battlefield while firing off several new spells to knock back the enemy. I made him so impressive out there that I ended up wondering why the word "failure" features in the title in the first place.

And who could forget the work of his attendants? You don't want to miss out on that particular spell of Noah's! Haha.

Then there's the mysterious Prince Ceylan, a key figure in this volume. Or is it Princess? And why is he so interested in Arcus? How does he know Arcus in the first place? The relationship between Ceylan and Arcus is also a highlight of volume four.

Arcus then went on to encounter the Phantom Chain. Her unreasonable request means Arcus might not get a chance to focus on his quest for revenge

for a while. Replace “might not” with “won’t,” actually. I can’t help but hope that Arcus finds his happiness sometime soon.

Finally there’s Eido, who only appears in the published version. What will his fate be after all the hostility he has shown Arcus and his companions?

The first volume of the manga version is out now, so I hope you’ll start following that too!

I’d now like to give my words of thanks to round things off. Thank you so much to GC Novels, my illustrator and artist on the manga version, Saika Fushimi, my editor K, manga editor H, my proofreading company Oraido, and all of my supportive readers.



“I am the magician, Arcus Raytheft.”
Heat burned through Arcus’s body.
He was here. He was fighting.



“Crucible.”

Crucible: that was what the kingdom called the magician whose combat boots clicked across the cold iron. His real name was Craib Abend.

He was a big, muscular man, whose aether overflowed and surrounded his body. He stood with his arms folded, and a military coat hung across his shoulders. Although his movements were disciplined and sharp, he still held that large, lit cigar between his teeth.

Glossary

The Gillis Empire

A huge nation in the continent's north-west. It holds several times as much territory as Lainur, and their population is incomparable. It invests more in industry than magical technology, focusing on manufacturing on a grand scale. One of the world's major powers, its imperial reputation is backed up by its ongoing invasions of several nations. It is the Empire's southern field army that is currently fighting the kingdom. The Empire's head of state is Rihaltio Gilrandy.

The Black Panther Cavalry

A group of elite cavalymen from the Gillis Empire's southern field army. While not featuring heavily in the story, it would take more than ten ordinary soldiers to stand up to one of these men. Both their armor and the armor of their horses is black.

Rustinell House

A royal house ruling over a portion of west Lainur. While it holds some independence, it is a vassal of the Crosellode family, and therefore under their rule. It unifies several regional monarchs who hold territory in the west. Its silver mines are its main income source. Its current ruler is Louise Rustinell, also known as the "Headhunter Witch" and "Our Lady of the National Razor."

Bǎi Liánbāng

A nation in the east of the continent made up of several ethnic groups; it lies on the opposite side of the Cross Mountain Range from Lainur. Its dress and culture is similar to China in the man's world. The Crosellodes' ancestors came from here. It is currently extending its influence eastwards, so the scale of its

territory and population is unknown.

The Ten Fables

The stories of large phenomena involved in creating the heavens and earth, taken from the first Ancient Chronicle, *The Birth of Heaven and Earth*. They are also known as the words which created the world. There are ten phenomena in all, and so far three magicians are known to be able to control them: Crucible (Craib Abend), Waterwheel (Roheim Langula), and Fortress (Gastarque Rondiel).

Sword of the Radiant Heavens

A treasured sword passed down the Crosellode family for generations. It was stolen alongside its stronghold during the previous generation by the Gillis Emperor Rihaltio. The former king of Lainur lost an arm during the fight. The royal family strongly desires to retrieve the sword, but it is a desire they have so far failed to fulfill.

Grimoire

Levin

Magic used by Lainur's king, Shinlu Crosellode, during the period when he was known as Lai. An offensive spell which controls the weather. It calls down thunder from the sky, and while its incantation is short, it is very powerful. The incantation is: *"Tear. Shatter. The firmament forewarns of a crashing torrent. Give form to the principles of Heaven and Earth, then take those exquisite principles and come down with a crash!"*

Lightning Fang

An offensive weather-control spell Ceylan used against Nadar's army. It calls lightning down from the sky similarly to Shinlu Crosellode's spell, but it looks grander and the incantation is slightly longer. The incantation is: *"Descending spear. Deathly flash. Dazzling gold. Foolish men grovel upon the earth, and dirty themselves with misery, coming upon a golden spear. Judge. Ruin. May that shout descend from the heavens!"*

Magnetic Butterfly

A support spell Arcus used against Nadar's army which creates a powerful magnetic field in an area of the caster's choosing, and is mainly used to draw in metal objects. The spell begins with a group of black butterflies which form one large butterfly that then turns into the magnetic field. The vortex of magnetic lines gives the impression of a huge black butterfly flapping its wings. The spell is capable of pulling armor-clad humans into the air. The incantation is: *"Jet-black wings glitter in the night. Your allies are black iron, as are your enemies. The flapping of those wings causes no sound, scattering iron sand up high, high into the sky. Tired of eating leaves, unsatisfied by cherries. Lend me metal tools. Feed me iron. You call for iron, a butterfly sustained by metal tools."*

Three-Walled Altar

A spell used by the Empire's magical troops. A refined, ritualistic defensive spell that requires several people incanting at once, creating a powerful barrier in front of them. The barrier is formed in a honeycomb structure, making it robust despite the low level of aether needed to cast the spell.

Spinning Barrel

An offensive spell Arcus used in the countryside of Craib's territory based on advanced weaponry. It fires several black stones in quick succession, similar to rifle bullets. It is powerful magic, but the projectiles are larger than that of the Gatling gun that inspired it, and they move slowly enough to be seen with the naked eye, both factors which differentiate it from a firearm. It creates a heavy load on the arm used to replicate the gun barrel, meaning it can only be used for ten to twenty seconds. However, its penetration and destructive yield is incomparable. It was powerful enough to breach the Empire's new defensive spell easily. The incantation is: *"Neverending, penetrating, torrent of evil. The dark blinking of soapberry and its crimson tide after the downpour. It runs and turns according to nature's will. Heat never cool, and know not your target. Pierce the soldiers' ears and drown out their battle cries. Run an incessant rampage."*

Icy Substitute

A defensive spell Noah used against Nadar's army which transfers damage to ice sculptures. It creates several sculptures modeled on the user, which then take on the damage inflicted on the caster. The sculptures break as they take damage, and lose their effectiveness the more they lose their shape. The caster takes no damage whether cut or hit, making it a mysterious spell to observe. The incantation is: *"My sculptures of ice. A lovely expression. There is no distinction and no ascertainment. Even a phantom thief turns pallid in the face of your gorgeous craft. Allow me to gift you this pain. May water flow in place of blood, and turn the shattered flesh to ice, melting the drops of life away. Present me with your brittle body, and receive my wounds."*

Zarach Ohr

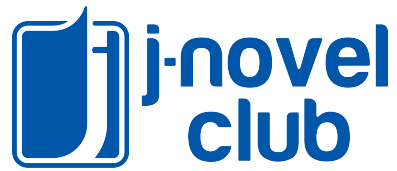
An offensive spell Arcus used against Byle Ern based on the science of illusion combined with myth. It is a weaker version of Ohr Ein Sof, a spell Arcus used to defeat the hex fiend that threatened the capital. While considerably powered down to consume less aether, it is strong enough to defeat one human. The user appears to shoot a laser beam from their hand, making it an awesome-looking spell. The incantation is: *“Unending light. Glittering beacon. Brightness and death. Like a revolving, twisting helix. Swaying, shaking, rocking tremors. Deathly light. Destruction of the heavens. Depart from the chaotic circle and fill my hand. Described in the birth of heaven and Earth, may the chant of reason dwell in my hand!”*

Frozen Wind

A spell Noah used to hold back Bargue Gruba. A supporting spell which creates an icy wind that curbs the opponent’s forward progress. The incantation is: *“Wickedness of the snowy mountain. Decayed garden. A desolate field in winter. Cover the earth to still the advance. Rage, frozen wind!”*

Vaha of the Waterwheel

A spell Roheim Langula used against the mercenaries. Recreating one of the Ten Fables which speak of the creation of the world, *Vaha’s Vortex*, it creates a huge whirlwind that lies parallel to the ground. It looks like a morning glory cloud formation from the side. Created for use against multiple enemies, it is powerful enough to completely sweep away an entire mid-size town. The incantation is: *“Turn, turn, waterwheel, turn. Azure helix from Vaha’s deep seabed, stir the chaos of origin and swoop down. They come and gather in the center of this whirling eternity. They fill and disappear from the center of this perpetual echo. Come, be suppressed, overcome, gone. Broken, shattered, torn, scattered. Described in the birth of heaven and Earth, may the cumulation of reason appear...”*



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The Magician Who Rose From Failure: Volume 4

by Hitsuji Gamei

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